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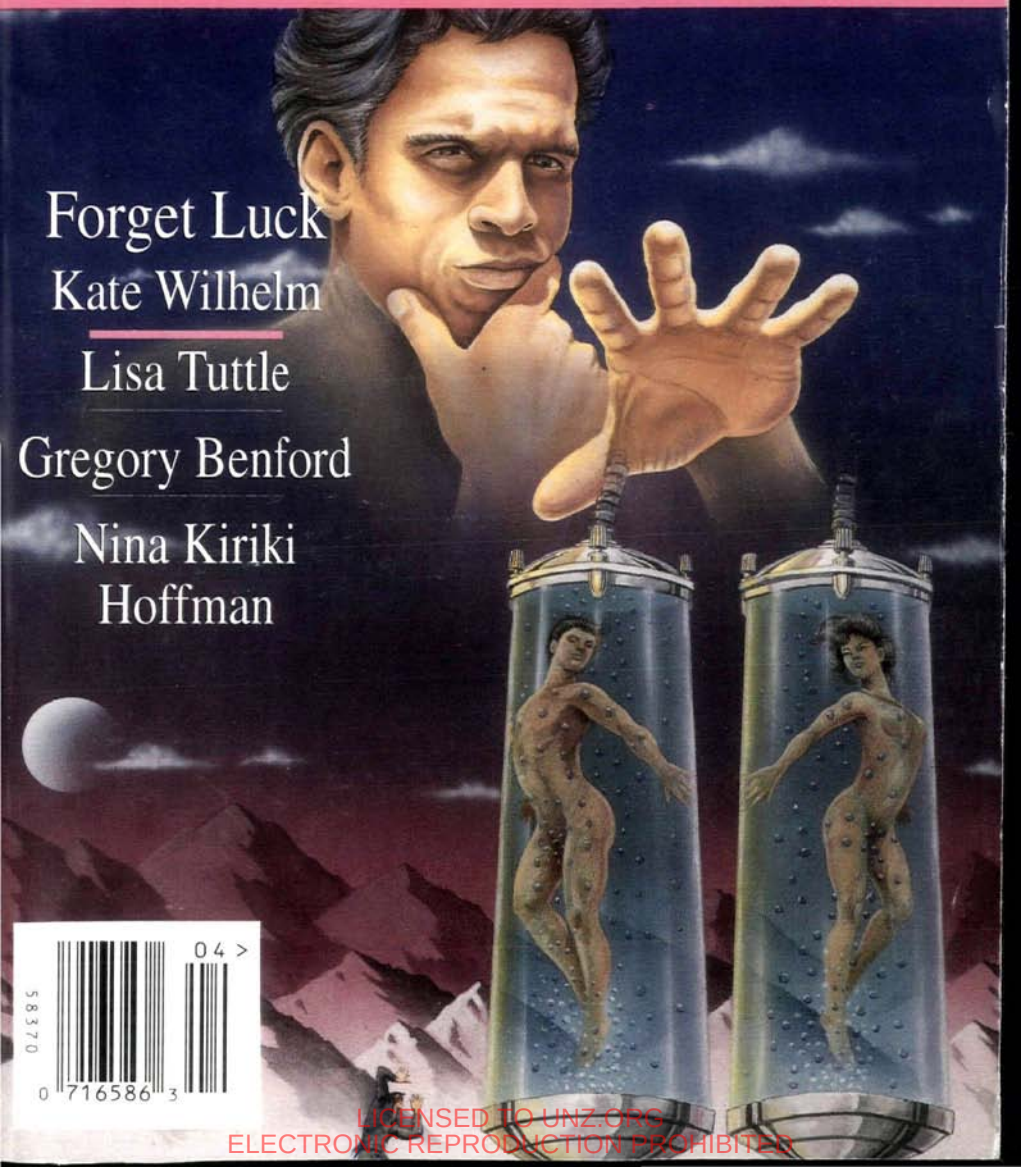

Forget Luck
Kate Wilhelm

Lisa Tuttle

Gregory Benford

Nina Kiriki Hoffman

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THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy & Science Fiction
APRIL • 47th Year of Publication

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

I FIRST "MET" Alan Brennert, the writer, in a small bookstore in Billings, Montana. My car had broken down in a Perkin's parking lot on the second day of a four-day drive from Eugene, Oregon, to Eau Claire, Wisconsin. I was broke, terrified, and traveling alone. I didn't own a credit card, and I had just enough money in traveler's checks to get me to Wisconsin and back. I said nothing of this to the mechanics who specialized in my quirky little bottom-of-all-lines foreign car, but my predicament must have been obvious. They took me in hand, found me an inexpensive but reputable hotel, made my car a high priority, and charged me almost nothing for labor.

It did, however, take them two days to find the problem, order the part, and install it. During that time, I read three newspapers, four magazines, and all five novels I had brought with me. I found a bookstore half a block from the hotel. The store, whose interior was about the size of the average display window at Bloomingdales, was in the second floor of a dying downtown shopping district. One wall was covered with bestsellers, another had mysteries, the center aisle held romances and the tiny shelf near the cashier contained science fiction.

I spent most of a morning in that store, looking for a book I hadn't read. I scoured the bestsellers, sf, and mysteries, and had finally turned my attention to the romances when a weird foil cover caught my eye. *Kindred Spirits* had a picture of a couple on the front, and some rather corny text about the ultimate love on the back. I read the cover copy and the first chapter enough to realize that this was no standard romance, that our main characters were dead, or near dead, or having some weird fantastical experience.

I bought the book and lost most of that long afternoon to great pleasure, enjoying it enough to go back to the store the next day and to ask what

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else Alan Brennert had done. The clerk/owner had no idea. He hadn't even realized that he had the book, but as I was leaving, he was thumbing through his remaining copy to see what had attracted me so.

Little did I realize at that time that I had already encountered — and enjoyed — Alan's work. He wrote teleplays for several shows I watched, including *Simon and Simon* (which I watched with my first husband), a detective show with lots of woo-woo elements (occasional ghosts, strange happenings in the night, etc). Alan also worked on the revived *Twilight Zone* series (which I watched all during the divorce) and wrote one of my favorite episodes, "Her Pilgrim Soul." By the time I discovered *Kindred Spirits*, Alan was working on "China Beach." Then I found his occasional, wonderful short stories, and I was hooked.

I got to know Alan the human being when he sent me a story called "The Third Sex"[1] for *Pulphouse: The Hardback Magazine* (which I edited before I came here). At the time, Alan was working on *L.A. Law*, but he was willing to rewrite a story for which I was going to pay him very little money, and he did so with great enthusiasm and good humor. (Editors soon learn that these traits are rare among writers.) The result was one of the most popular stories in the entire *Pulphouse* series.

Soon after that, Alan published another novel, *Time and Chance* (from Tor), wrote a musical, *Weird Romance*, which ran off-Broadway in New York (and is now performed at high schools all over the country), and has gone on to write some of the best episodes on the new *Outer Limits*. I moved to *F&SF*, and Alan sent me a number of short stories, including the Nebula winning "Ma Qui." And over that time, we had a number of conversations about television, about writing, and about stories.

And somewhere in those conversations, we discussed the differences between short stories and teleplays. They exercise different writing muscles. They often produce different results. But they can — and often do — come from the same story.

For example: "Her Pilgrim Soul," the *Twilight Zone* teleplay, is also a fascinating novella which has a whole different feel than the televised version. "Her Pilgrim Soul" is also the second act of *Weird Romance* and is, because I think the music adds wonderfully to the emotional content, my favorite version of that story. But Alan wrote the novella — and the musical/play version — after he wrote the teleplay.

Last year, Alan mentioned that he had an idea for an *Outer Limits*

[1] Reprinted in the *Best of Pulphouse*, published by St. Martin's in 1991.

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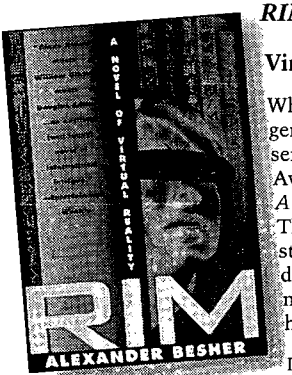


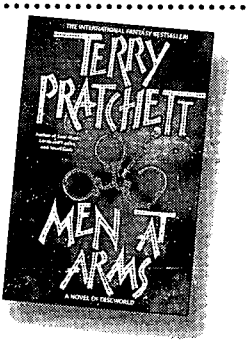
RIM: A Novel of Virtual Reality Alexander Besher

Virtually speaking, reality has hit the fan.

What happens when a book comes along that can define a new genre? Robin Williams buys the film rights. *Wired* magazine serializes it. And editors nominate it for the Philip K. Dick Award. No wonder Alexander Besher's cyber-noir novel *RIM: A Novel of Virtual Reality* is destined to become a classic. The year is 2027 and Tokyo is hit by a Mega-Quake that strands thousands of virtual reality players in their suddenly deadly game world. The world's greatest psychic detective must battle murderous cyber-soul traversing monkeys to free his son—and the world.

ISBN: 0-06-105669-3 • $5.99 U.S./$7.99 Can. • March 1996/Mass Market

MEN AT ARMS: Discworld Series Terry Pratchett



Trolls rule!

We bet you can't read just one! One Terry Pratchett book that is. That's why HarperPrism is excited to be publishing *MEN AT ARMS*, our 4th mind-warping, Discworld novel from the bestselling fantasy humorist. *The New York Review of Science Fiction* calls Pratchett "the funniest parodist working in the field today, period." In his newest madness, trolls and elves join the Discworld police force when there is an assassin's plot afoot involving a lost prince, a ring and a very old and sharp sword. You get the point! OUCH!

ISBN: 0-06-109218-5 • $12.00 U.S. • March 1996/Trade Paperback

THE HEDGE OF MIST Patricia Kennealy-Morrison

A timeless tale for a new millennium.

Author Patricia Kennealy-Morrison has lived an amazing, iconoclastic life. She married rock star Jim Morrison. She is a High Priestess in a Celtic pagan tradition. And most significantly, she is a storytelling sorceress of the highest order. In *THE HEDGE OF MIST*, the third volume in her *Tales of Arthur* series, she weaves together Celtic myth and science fiction to bring her Keltiad epic to a moving and triumphant resolution. Holy quests, sibling betrayals, evil sorcery, deadly prophesies all live on in this timeless tale of a once and future king.

ISBN: 0-06-105230-2 • $22.00 U.S./$31.00 Can. • March 1996/Hardcover

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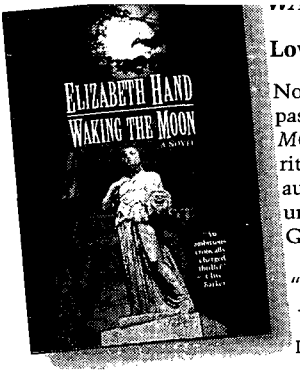

Love is ancient. But evil is eternal.

Nominated for the World Fantasy Award, exploding with the passion and seductive power of Anne Rice, *WAKING THE MOON* is an unforgettable tale of modern love and ancient ritual. Elizabeth Hand calls her new novel an "alternative autobiography: my life, if my two best friends from the university had just happened to be incarnations of the Dark Goddess and her beautiful Consort."

"Extraordinary...an ambitious, erotically-charged thriller."
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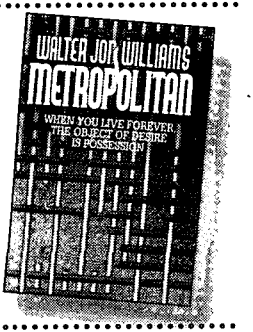
ISBN: 0-06-105443-7 • $5.99 U.S./$7.99 Can. • April 1996/Mass Market

METROPOLITAN Walter Jon Williams



Plug into a high voltage thriller.

Sixteen-time Hugo/Nebula/World Fantasy Award nominee Walter Jon Williams created a masterpiece in *METROPOLITAN*, and now this science fiction thriller, which turns the future upside down, is finally coming out in paperback. Touching on every emotion from love to greed, Williams will take you on a roller coaster ride through a bold new future world where quantum science meets magic as rebels attempt to harness a city's living energy to storm heaven.

ISBN: 0-06-105441-0 • $5.99 U.S./$7.99 Can. • April 1996/Mass Market

ANCIENT SHORES Jack McDevitt

Warning: Never unearth the unearthly.

Nebula Award nominee Jack McDevitt has created one of the most ambitious science fiction triumphs of the decade. Reminiscent of the best of Heinlein and Clarke, *ANCIENT SHORES* is a bold, speculative adventure that does not shrink from the big questions—and the big answers. A sailboat turns up buried in a wheat field—2000 miles from the nearest ocean. The bizarre mystery gets even stranger when scientists discover the boat is made from a material with an utterly impossible atomic number. Is it an artifact from a past alien civilization? Or a doorway to the future? Everyone must know the truth—even if it kills them.

ISBN: 0-06-105207-8 • $22.00 U.S./$31.00 Can.
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story that he thought would also make a strong novella. And he proposed to me that we publish the novella at the same time as the television show airs his episode. This meant that Alan had to write the novella and the teleplay simultaneously, given publishing lead times and studio lead times. Writers rarely do this. The books that tie into movies, for example, are often written by someone other than the screenwriter.

I thought this would be an interesting experiment, to see how the teleplay and the story work off each other. So I accepted Alan's proposal. And in August of this year, "The Refuge" arrived on my desk. As I write this editorial, in December of 1995, the teleplay is being cast. It will be shot in late January, edited in February, and aired in March. We don't have an official date yet nor have I seen any copies of the script. But I know that some night in March, I will be watching the *Outer Limits* with intense focus, to see if the director's imagined view of Alan's story matches my view of the same story — and to see what subtle changes the different media make on the same tale. Will the complex emotional tangle be as riveting and claustrophobic on the small screen as it is on the page? I don't know, and there's only one way to find out.

What I do know is that Alan continues to do what he has done since the first day I unwittingly encountered his work. He gives me a more interesting place to go, a place to escape to, whether it is watching a detective show to flee a dying marriage or reading a romantic fantasy novel so that I could wish myself away from a lonely (and almost unaffordable) hotel room in Billings, Montana.

I hope you will enjoy the "Refuge" as much as I do, and I hope you will catch the teleplay on *Outer Limits*. This is an experiment we're quite excited about.

We think you will be too.

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Kate Wilhelm's most recent story for F&SF, *"Naming the Flowers," (February, 1993) made the final Nebula ballot. Since then, she has written some very well received mystery novels, the most recent of which is* Flush of Shadows *from St. Martin's Press.*

Her newest story, "Forget Luck," is an entertaining blend of conferences, extra-marital affairs, and the ability to survive any situation — especially the deadly kind.

Forget Luck

By Kate Wilhelm

TONY MANETTI HAD NOT been assigned to cover the colloquium at Michigan State, but the day before it was to start, his editor had a family crisis. Tony would have to go. A suite was already reserved in the magazine's name at the Holiday Inn; a rental car would be waiting at the Lansing airport.

Tony had called Georgina twice, leaving the message that meant she was to return the call when her husband was not around, but she had not called back. Already on her way from Berkeley, he decided. Of course, she thought Harry would be covering the conference, and accordingly had not been in touch with Tony. Five nights, he kept thinking, five nights, and days, of course.

When he checked in at the motel, Georgina had not yet registered. He paid scant attention to the academic papers the desk clerk handed him; the speakers would all make certain *Academic Currents* received a copy of their papers. He checked the schedule. That evening, Saturday, there would be opening ceremonies, then people would drift away to eat and drink. On

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Sunday there would be a brunch, several luncheons, teas, more eating and drinking, and on Monday the attendees would start lecturing one another. He planned to miss it all. He could read the papers any time, and if anything interesting happened, someone would tell him all about it. He planned to be in upper Michigan with the gorgeous Georgina.

She had not checked in yet when he came back down, after leaving his gear in his suite. He went to the bar, crowded with academics, ordered a gin and tonic, and looked for a place to sit where he could keep an eye on the lobby.

Someone said, "Ah, Peter, good to see you again." A heavyset bald man was beckoning to him.

"Dr. Bressler," Tony said. "How are you." He looked past him toward the front desk where people were checking in in a continuous flow.

"Very well, Peter. Here, take a seat."

"It's Tony. Tony Manetti." Bressler had been his teacher for a term at Columbia; Tony had seen him twice, once in the hall and once in class, and every time they met at a conference, Bressler called him Peter.

"Yes, of course. You're the FBI fellow."

"No sir. I work for *Academic Currents*, the magazine." A new group had replaced the old; she was not among them.

"Of course. Of course. Peter, you're just the sort of fellow I've been looking for, someone with your training."

Bressler was in his sixties, a contender for the Nobel any year now for his past work in genetics, and he was more than a little crazy, Tony had decided six years ago in his class. A redhead appeared. He strained to see. Wrong redhead.

"...a bit of a problem getting blood..."

He thought of her legs, a dancer's long legs.

"...can't seem to get even a drop. One can't very well simply ask for it, you see."

He had been to the upper peninsula once in late summer; it had been misty and cool, romantic, with a lot of shadowy forest.

"...have to think they're onto me. I simply can't account for it in any other way. Four accidents in the last two years, and some of my finest graduate students..."

Admit it, he would say, your marriage is a sham. I can move out to the west coast, he would say. I don't have to stay in Chicago; I can work out of anywhere.

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"...really substantiates my theory, you see, but it also poses a severe problem."

Tony had hardly touched his gin and tonic; it was simply something to do while he waited. He tasted it and put it down again. Bressler was gazing off into space, frowning.

And then she appeared, clinging to the arm of Melvin Witcome, smiling up at him the same way she sometimes had smiled up at Tony. Melvin Witcome was some kind of special course coordinator for the Big Ten, a man of power and influence; not yet forty, independently wealthy, handsome, suave, Phi Beta Kappa, with a doctorate in charm or something, he was everything Tony was not. He watched Witcome sign the registration, watched him and Georgina take their computer keys, watched them point out their bags to a bellboy, then board the elevator together. He was not aware that he had stood up until he heard Bressler's voice.

"I don't mean to imply there's any immediate danger. Sit down, Peter."

He sat down and gulped some of his drink. It was a mistake; they simply happened to arrive at the same time; they were old friends; she had not expected Tony to be there. He finished his drink. She had not expected him to be there.

"You're not going to the beastly opening ceremony, are you?" Bressler placed his hand on Tony's arm. "Let's go have some dinner instead. I want to pick your brain. You're a godsend, Peter. I was desperate for guidance, and you appeared. A godsend."

He had talked to the class about angels, Tony remembered then. Something about angels. Tony had tuned out. He had tuned out most of that year, in fact.

Bressler's voice had grown a bit shrill. "No one knows how humiliating it is to be considered a weirdo. A weirdo," he repeated with bitter satisfaction. "Simply because you have come upon a truth that others are not yet willing to accept or even to see. "

"Angels," Tony said.

"Excellent, Peter! Ten years or more and you remember. But, of course, they prefer to see angels. Come on, let's go have some dinner."

Tony stood up. It had been six years ago; he didn't bother to make the correction. When they emerged from the dim bar, a mirage of pine forest danced in the street before him. A taxi drove through the dripping trees, and Bressler waved it over.

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They had flaming cheese, and retsina with lamb kebabs, and ouzo with honey-doused walnut cakes. Bressler talked without letup throughout. Tony listened sporadically, brooding about the gorgeous Georgina.

"Of course, we all knew you were very special," Bressler said, then sipped his Greek coffee. "Your job is proof enough. I know people who would kill for your job. Rumor was you saved Bush's life or something, wounded in the line of duty, permanently disabled and quite justly rewarded, all that."

What really had happened was that when he was twenty-two, with a bachelor of science degree, he had applied to the FBI, along with his best friend, Doug Hastings, and to their surprise, they both had been accepted. A year later, his first real assignment had taken him and a senior agent out to do a routine-background security check. A nothing assignment, until a fourteen-year-old boy with no hair had used him for target practice. Tony would have been quite seriously wounded, even shot dead, if he had not bent over at precisely the right moment to free his pants leg from the top of his sock. As it was he had been shot in the upper arm. Then, two weeks after being declared fit to resume a life of fighting evil, he had been shot again. The second time had been from the rear, and the only people behind him that day had been two other special agents and their supervisor, a unit chief.

He rather liked the version Bressler was voicing, and, as he had been enjoined never to reveal the truth of the matter, he remained silent, impassive, inscrutable. And, he was afraid, ridiculous. The second time he had been approaching a Buick in a crouch, and when he realized it was empty, he had stood up and started to turn to say the coast was clear. The bullet had gone through his arm instead of his head. The other arm this time.

"Must be like being a priest, once a priest always a priest. One doesn't forget training like that. Once FBI, always FBI; isn't that right?

Tony finished his ouzo. The last time he had seen his former best friend Doug Hastings, Doug had said, "Keep away from me, jinx. Orders. Okay? No hard feelings?"

"Well, no one expects you to talk about it," Bressler said. He waved his tiny cup for more Greek coffee. "But you have had the training. Put your mind to it, Peter. How can I get blood samples from those people?"

Cautiously Tony said, "I need time to think about it."

"Of course, of course. When we go back to the hotel I'll hand you the reports, my notes, everything. It was providence that sent you to me, Peter. I had a feeling. Are you ready?"

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What he would do, Tony had decided, was gather up the papers already in hand, check out in the morning, and beat it.

Back in his suite, he gazed morosely at the stack of papers; the desk clerk had handed him another pile, and Bressler had added his own bulging package. His head was aching with a dull distant surf-like monotony; he had had more to drink that evening than he generally consumed in a year, and he was not at all ready for sleep. When he found himself wondering if Georgina and Witcome were in a suite like his, with a couch like his, the same coffee table, the same king-sized bed, he began to shuffle papers. Not Bressler's, he put them aside and looked over a few others. But bits and pieces of what Bressler had said floated back to his mind, not in any rational coherent way, in phrases. He suspected that Bressler had talked in disconnected phrases.

Then, because it was his job to condense ten, fifteen, twenty pages of academic papers to a paragraph that would make sense to a reader, even if only temporarily, he found he was doing the same thing to this evening with Bressler.

Genes were the secret masters of the universe. Tony blinked, but he was certain Bressler had said that. Right. Genes ruled the body they inhabited, communicated with it; they ordered black hair, or red. And silky skin, and eyes like the deepest ocean... He shook himself. Genes were immortal, unless the carriers died without progeny. They decided issues like intelligence, allergies, homosexuality...

He closed his eyes, trying to remember where the angels came in. Sixty-eight percent of those polled believed in angels; forty-five percent believed in their own personal guardian angel. That was it. For guardian angel read genes.

Everyone knew someone or about someone who had had a miraculous escape from certain death or terrible injury. The sole survivor of an airplane crash; the infant who didn't freeze when abandoned in zero temperature; a highway accident that should have been fatal...

"Forget angels, forget a sixth sense, an intuitive avoidance of danger. Think alleles, the right combination of alleles. Genes are the secret masters and a particular combination of alleles, a particular gene, or more than one possibly, comes into being occasionally to rule all the others, for what purpose we can only guess. These very special genes can cause other genes to do their bidding, cause a change in metabolism that keeps a freezing infant from dying, regulate heart and lung functions to allow a drowned boy to be

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revived, alter every tissue in the human body and permit it to walk away from an impact that should have killed it outright..."

Tony yawned. There had been more, three hours' worth more, but he had condensed, combined, edited, and had made it coherent. He wished he had some aspirin. What he had done was compact a yard of garbage into a small neat package, but it was still the same garbage. He took a shower and went to bed, and felt lost in an acre of hard, cold, polyester loneliness.

HE WAS UP and dressed by seven-thirty, determined to be gone before West Coast people, Berkeley people, before Georgina was awake. He ordered breakfast, and while waiting for it he stuffed papers into his briefcase, leaving Bressler's stack to be turned in at the front desk, to be put in the man's message box, or thrown away, or whatever. When those were the only reading material remaining, he glanced at them.

The subject reports were on top. Everett Simes, at eleven, had been found in a snowdrift, body temperature sixty-three. He had survived with no ill effects. At nineteen he had fallen off a two-hundred-foot cliff and had walked away from the accident, no ill effects. Vera Tanger had survived an explosion in a restaurant that had killed everyone else there; she had survived having her stalled car totaled by a train. Carl Waley, two miraculous survivals. Beverly Wang, two. Stanley R. Griggs, two.

He replaced the papers in the folder when there was a knock on his door. His breakfast had arrived, and looming over the cart was Dr. Bressler, nearly pushing it himself in his eagerness to gain entrance.

"Peter, I'm so glad you're up and about already. Did you read my material?"

Tony motioned to the waiter to unload the cart by the window, signed the charge, and waved him away without speaking.

"Do you have another cup lurking under there?" Bressler asked. The waiter produced another cup and saucer. "And you might bring another pot of coffee," Bressler said. He settled down at the window table and began to lift lids off dishes.

They shared the breakfast; Bressler ate only the finger food since he had no silverware. Sausage was finger food. He talked constantly.

"The subjects I'm after all had at least two escapes," he said. "Often three or even four. But two is sufficient. I excluded those with only one reported

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escape. One could be considered coincidence, but two, three, four? Forget coincidence. No one knows how many possible subjects are out there; not all accidents get reported, of course. I settled for five who live close enough to New York to make it possible, I thought, to extract a sample from them. Hair follicles, saliva, blood, skin scrapings. You know, you're a scientist. But four times in the past two years the graduate students I sent out had accidents of their own. One lost the hair brush he had stolen when he was mugged. Another was chased away by a ferocious dog; he fell and broke his leg trying to elude the beast. One never could get near the subject; she was as wary as a Mata Hari." He smiled at his little rhyme. "My students are showing some reluctance concerning further attempts."

Tony emptied the coffee pot into his cup.

Bressler looked at it in disappointment. "Have you come up with an idea?" he asked then.

"Ask outright for a sample," Tony said. "Offer to pay five bucks a spit. Align yourself with a doctor, a clinic or something like that, and offer free checkups. Find their dentists and pay him to collect a sample. Hire a mugger and have him do a scraping before he snatches the loot. Hire a flock of guys in white coats to swarm over an apartment building, or an office, or wherever the hell the subject is, and say you're checking for an outbreak of plague. Hire some prostitutes, male and female, to seduce them one and all." There was a tap on the door; he went to open it. "There must be a thousand ways you can get what you're after." He admitted the waiter with another pot of coffee.

When they were alone again, Bressler was beaming. "See, that's what I meant. A man with certain training. I tried some of those ideas, of course, but some are quite ingenious. I couldn't do anything that even suggested harm, naturally. Heaven alone knows what the repercussions would be if the genes thought they were under attack. It's bad enough that they know they have been discovered." He poured coffee for them both.

Tony gazed at him in disbelief. "The genes know you're after them." he said after a moment. "The genes are taking defensive measures."

"No doubt about it. They know." He put one finger in his coffee, then used the moistened tip to pick up toast crumbs, which he ate.

"What will you do with the data if you get it?" Tony asked.

Bressler looked very blank. "Do? You mean like the agriculture bioengineers? Breeding potatoes with enough poison to kill off the potato

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bugs? Strawberries that grow and bear fruits in subfreezing temperature? I don't plan to *do* anything except publish, of course. Those genes have absolutely nothing to fear from me, Peter."

"I understand," Tony said. He looked at his watch and stood up. "Gosh, I've got to run." He picked up Bressler's papers to hand back to the man.

"Keep them, Peter. Keep them. I have copies. I know you haven't had time to think this through. Read them, then get back to me. Will you do that?"

"Sure," Tony said. "I'll get back to you."

By the time he had checked out, and was on the road, he was grinning broadly. Bressler wouldn't get in touch with him, he thought. He wouldn't know who to get in touch with, just Peter somebody. His grin faded as he realized he had no destination. Not the upper peninsula, those cool misty dark romantic forests. Not alone. He had no one he had to go back home to; no one expected him in the office ever. He drifted in, drifted out; eventually he would lug in the ton of scholarly papers he had collected, turn in his column on the symposium, and be free until the next one. He remembered Bressler's words: people would kill for his job.

He was exactly what the job description stated: special assistant editor responsible for a column devoted to academic symposia, colloquia, conferences, meetings of all sorts that involved two or more university-level representatives of two or more universities, wherever such a meeting was being held — Paris, Hong Kong, Boston, Rio...

Sometimes he wondered how high the supervisor who had shot him had risen, or if he had been tossed overboard. Tony had never doubted that it was an accident, but a trigger-happy unit chief was not a good idea. He knew it had been the supervisor if only because neither of the other two agents had been even chided for carelessness. Sometimes he wondered how the agency had managed to get him, Tony, into Columbia on such short notice, and see that he got a master's, and then this plum of a job. It was understood that the job required at least a master's degree.

Sometimes, more ominously, he wondered if one day they would reel him in and demand .... He never could finish the thought. Demand what?

Signs had been warning him that if he wanted to go to Detroit, to get in the right lane. He eased into the left lane.

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That night he sat in a screened porch on a pseudo-rustic cabin and watched the sun set across Lake Michigan. Mosquitoes worked on the screens with chainsaws trying to get in. He had spent all day driving aimlessly, talking himself out of the notion of Georgina. She was too old for him, at least forty to his thirty-one. He had been flattered that an older woman had found him attractive. She had been grateful when he mentioned her various papers at various conferences, and had in fact helped him write her notices. Her return rate for his calls had been no more than one out of six, but, she had explained, her husband was so jealous, and always there.

Then, to escape the reality of love lost, he had turned to the fantasy of master genes ruling the universe. Pretend, he had told himself, pretend it's true, that life-saving intuition, coincidence, messages from the collective unconscious, good luck, guardian angels can all be attributed to a single source, and that source is genetic. Then what? He knew, from the various conferences he had attended, that the genotyping success rate was accelerating at a pace that astounded even those participating in it. So, he had continued, pretend they find such a master gene, isolate it, then what? The answer had come with surprising swiftness. Breed a master race, supermen.

He grinned at the idea, as he watched the last cerise band in the sky darken. When it merged into inky black, he went inside his cabin and regarded with some fondness the bulky pile of Bressler papers. He began to read through them.

Bressler had a list of thirty or forty possible subjects, each one with an impressively complete dossier. He had done his homework. They were scattered throughout the states; the five he had targeted were all within a hundred miles of Manhattan. Every subject had escaped death at least twice; all the escapes had been reported in various newspapers, which were referenced in footnotes.

Tony scanned the dossiers briefly, then went to the summaries. Bressler had anticipated the few questions Tony had: none of the parents showed any of the survival traits of their offspring. A higher than normal percentage of the subjects were single children of their biological parents, although there were step-brothers and sisters. Few of the subjects showed any other unusual traits; they were a good cross section of the population, some very bright, some dim, laborers, professionals, technicians.... The one thing they all had in common, it appeared, was the ability to survive situations that should have killed them. And five of them, at least, were too elusive to catch and sample.

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He felt almost sad when he closed the folder. Poor old guy, spending the past six years or more on this. He remembered something Bressler had said in the restaurant, "How many more do you suppose there are? We'll never know because no one keeps track of those who don't board the airplane that crashes into the ocean. The ones who stay home the day the mad bomber wipes out the office building. The ones who take a different route and miss the twenty-car pile-up and fireball. The ones who... But you get my point. We can't know about any of them."

The ones who bend down to straighten out a pants leg and don't get shot through the heart, Tony thought suddenly. *The ones who stand up and turn around and don't get shot in the head,*

Oh, boy! he thought then. *Folie à deux!* He went out on the porch and gazed at the lake where uneasy moonlight shimmered. After a moment he stripped, wrapped a towel around his waist, and went out for a swim. The water was shockingly cold. He could demonstrate to Bressler just how nutty his theory was, he thought, swimming; all he had to do was keep going toward Wisconsin until cold and fatigue sank him like a stone. Another time, he decided, turning back to shore.

In bed, every muscle relaxed to a pudding-like consistency, he wondered what he would have done if Bressler had asked for a sample of his blood. His entire body twitched and he plummeted into sleep.

The next morning, he found himself driving back to East Lansing. He listened to talk radio for a while, then sang harmony with Siegfried on tape, and tried to ignore the question: Why? He didn't know why he was going back.

There was no vacancy at the Holiday Inn. The desk clerk kindly advised him to go to the Kellogg Center where someone would see that he got housing.

He never had driven through the campus before; it appeared to have been designed as a maze, with every turn taking him back and forth across the same brown river again and again. The grounds, the broad walks, the streets, the expanses of manicured lawn were almost entirely deserted and eerily silent. When he approached the botanical gardens for the third time, luck intervened in his wanderings; he spotted Dr. Bressler strolling with another man, both facing away from him. He parked, opened his door to go after Bressler, hand back the package, be done with it. Then he came to a stop, half crouched in his movement to leave the car. The men had turned toward him briefly, and

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the second man was his old long lost pal, Doug Hastings. They walked to a greenhouse, away from him. He drew back inside the car.

He drove again, this time to Grand River, the main street in East Lansing. He turned toward Lansing. Without considering why he was doing this, he stopped at a shopping complex that covered acres and acres, miles maybe, and took the Bressler papers into an office supply warehouse store where he used a self-service copy machine and made copies of everything. He bought a big padded envelope and addressed it to himself, in care of his mother in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, put his copies inside, and mailed it at a post office in the sprawling mall. Then, finished, he returned to the Michigan State campus, and this time he found the Kellogg Center building on the first try.

Kellogg Center was the heart of the conference; here the academics met and talked, ate lunch, many of them had rooms, and the conference staff people manned a table with receptionist, programs, nametags, and general information. In the lobby Tony chatted with several people, was asked to wait a second while someone dashed off to get him a copy of a presentation paper; someone else handed him another folder. He was waiting for either Doug Hastings, or Dr. Bressler, whoever came first.

Someone thrust another folder at him. He took it, and let a woman draw him toward a small alcove; then he saw Bressler enter, followed seconds later by Doug. He turned his attention to the woman whose hand was heavy on his arm. "Will you attend our session this afternoon?" she was asking. "It's at three."

"Oh, Peter!" Bressler called out, and came lumbering across the hallway toward him. Doug Hastings turned to the reception table and began to examine the schedule.

The woman looked bewildered as Bressler reached them and took Tony's other arm, dragged him away. "Peter, do you still have my material? I thought you left already. They said you checked out."

Tony was carrying several folders by then, and a manila envelope, as well as his bulging briefcase. "Sure, it's in here somewhere," he said. He opened his briefcase on a small table, added the new papers to the others, and drew out Bressler's package. "I'll get to it in the next couple of weeks."

"No, no," Bressler said hastily, snatching the package, which he held against his chest with both hands. "That's all right, Peter. All that material to read. You don't need to add to it." He backed up a step or two, turned, and hurried away.

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Tony was closing his briefcase again when he heard Doug's voice very close to his ear. "Well, I'll be damned if it isn't Tony Manetti!"

Doug grasped his shoulders and swung him around, examined his face, then wrapped him in a bear hug. "My God, how long's it been? Eight, nine years? Hey, how you been doing? What's going on? Looks like you're collecting bets or something." Talking, he drew Tony toward the front entrance, away from the others milling about. "How about a cup of java? Some place less crowded. Hey, remember when we used to duck out of class for a beer? Those were the days, weren't they?"

They never had gone out for a beer together; Tony hadn't been a drinker then any more than he was now. "You an academic?" he asked on the sidewalk.

"No way. Assignment. Listened to a bunch of guys and gals explain the economic importance of joint space exploration. Whew! Heavy going."

For the next hour, in a coffee shop, Doug talked about his life, and asked questions; talked about the past, and asked questions; talked about traveling, and asked questions.

"You mean you get their papers and don't go to the talks? What a racket! Let's see what you've got."

Tony handed over his briefcase, and watched Doug go through the contents.

"You're really going to read all that stuff? Read it here?"

"Not a word. They'd want to talk to me about it if they thought I'd read the material. I save it for home."

"You know, I thought that was you the other night, going out with a big bald guy?"

Tony laughed. "Old Bressler. He's into angels. Spent too much time looking in an electron microscope or something, I guess." He added sadly, "He gave me some stuff to take home, and then grabbed it back. Around the bend, poor old guy."

Later, answering another question slipped into a monologue, he told Doug that he had had a heavy date Sunday and Sunday night, and talked dreamily about a moonlight swim.

Doug leered. "Girl on every campus, I bet." Soon afterward he glanced at his watch and groaned. "This job ain't what I thought it'd be," he said. "You going back?"

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"Just to pick up my car. I've got what I need."

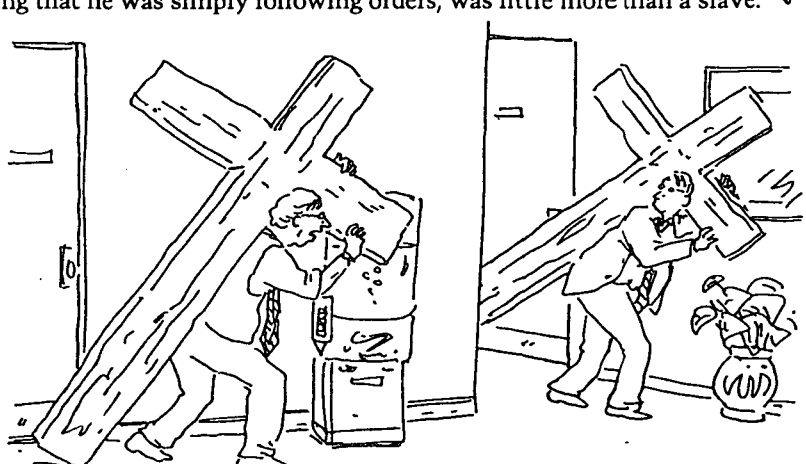
They walked back to the Kellogg Center, where Tony got into the rental car, waved to Doug, and took off. He worked at putting the pieces together on the way to Lansing Airport. They must not want Bressler to publish a word about what he was up to. And Doug would report that there was no reason to reel in Tony, who didn't suspect a thing.

At the airport, he turned in the car, went to the ticket desk to change his reservation, and sat down to wait for his flight back to Chicago.

They probably didn't believe a word of it, he mused, and yet, what if? They would watch and wait, let the genius work it out if he could. But they would be there if he did. Right.

He was remembering incidents from his nearly forgotten childhood. At seven he and his stepbrother had played in the barn loft, and he had fallen out the highest window, gotten up, and walked away. Neither ever mentioned it to anyone; they had been forbidden to play up there. At twelve he and two other kids had been in a canoe on the Delaware River when a storm roared in like a rocket ship. The canoe had been hit by lightning, two kids had died, but he had swum to shore; he had not told anyone he had been there, since no one would have believed him anyway.

Now what, he wondered. Visit his mother, of course, and read all the Bressler material. After that was a blank, but that was all right. When the time came he would know what to do. He felt curiously free and happy, considering that he was simply following orders, was little more than a slave.



"Jesus, Ted — you, too!" Shanahan

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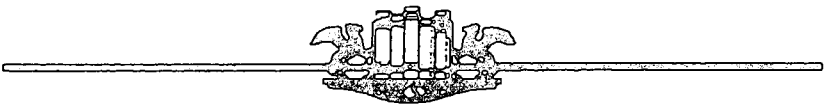

BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

Shadow of Ashland, by Terence M. Green, Forge, 224pp, $19.95

The Off Season, by Jack Cady, St. Martin's Press, 304pp, $23.95

SEVERAL issues back I took a look at *From Time to Time*, the sequel to Jack Finney's classic *Time and Again*, and with the pleasures of those two books still in mind I felt compelled to open this pretty little time-travel novel by Terence Green, whose shorter work I had encountered somewhat earlier as part of David Hartwell's and Glenn Grant's anthology of Canadian science fiction, *Northern Stars*. Green's story there was a cardinal example of Canadian sf's comfortable marriage with the wider world of contemporary fiction — a quiet, introspective, ambiguous tale about a lonely woman colonist on a distant planet — and it featured the same spare style that you'll notice immediately on opening *Shadow of Ashland*; truth be told, his short, clipped sentences suit this book (set on this planet, in this century) better than they did the more alien setting of that earlier story.

Here Green gives us Leo Nolan, forty-year-old Toronto native whose mother lies dying in 1984. One of her last wishes is to find out whatever happened to her long-lost brother, Jack, who left Toronto at the height of the Depression and hasn't been heard from since 1934. With little to go on but faded memories and a few of Jack's old letters, Leo sets out to find his uncle (or at least to learn his fate), making his way down to Ashland, Kentucky, to a run-down rooming house called The Scott Hotel, the last address he has for Jack.

There he finds the Scott's owners, Stanley and Teresa Matusik, who remember his uncle's stay, though they're rather cagey about his departure. Leo takes a room, and takes to haunting Ashland's streets, hoping vaguely to find some other clue to lead him on. His efforts eventually

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take him back to the Ashland of 1934, where he meets Jack, and the younger Matusiks, and discovers the secret of his uncle's disappearance.

Though the publisher plays up the superficial resemblances between *Shadow of Ashland* and *Time and Again*, what's more immediately striking are the deep differences between the two books. Finney chooses a rather untroubled young hero for his book, whose trip into the past is part of a research project rather than the result of a private obsession (though Si Morley's got some personal interest that charges his journey with private significance, it's not nearly so powerful as Leo's midlife crisis and grief over the death of his mother). As result, *Time and Again* pays much more attention to the obvious hooks of the scenario: the excitement of actually visiting the past, the differences large and small between then and now, the complications of daily survival in an alien time, and the rising tension of a mystery being slowly uncovered. *Shadow of Ashland* plays it very differently, almost self-consciously ignoring those hooks in favor of focusing on Leo's emotional interior. In fact, Green seems so intent on this focus that the book, particularly for the first third or so, feels sometimes hurried, too rushed to allow the basic drama of the scenario to develop itself. The trail Leo follows doesn't unfold bit by bit, with increasing tension, but instead Leo takes the few clues he's got and heads right to Ashland, there to start wandering. A little more attention to the development of the premise would have given the book's early chapters a sense of drive they're lacking.

This lack is particularly noticeable because, despite the first-person point of view and Green's clear interest in Leo's interior landscape, we don't get to know Leo very well until midway through the book, and even then his character remains strangely remote. Leo's introspection rarely plunges very deep, and his thoughts that we overhear tell us little beyond the obvious — after he's seen his uncle face-to-face for the first time, we expect he'll be surprised and excited, but the only indication of his feelings in the text is: "Jack, I thought. Jack Radey." Not much to go on, really. A less hurried unfolding might have offered more opportunity for us to get to know Leo better, to get more emotionally involved in his story.

If this difference leaves *Shadow of Ashland* seeming an inferior book, in other ways its departures from *Time and Again's* model make it stronger. Finney weaves a recurring juxtaposition of the old and new New

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Yorks through his story, betraying a clear preference for the old (Si Morley ends up staying there, after all); Green develops a past-present juxtaposition as well, but he uses it for a very different purpose. Rather than presenting the two eras as alternatives, Green treats the past as an integral part of the present, the foundation on which it's built. The similarities between 1934 and 1984 — the relationship between the two periods — become more important than the differences.

As Leo retraces his uncle's travels, he broods on the changes wrought by the years: local color has been supplanted by franchised sameness. "People stayed at the Ramada Inn in 1984, not the Scott." Leo's feelings of rootlessness and alienation are paradigmatic of the contemporary scene, when so many traditional bonds and structures have vanished. The more he learns about 1934, though, the more it seems that many of the conditions of the present have their roots in those desperate Depression years; there's a disturbing parallel between the frustrations and fears of average people then, watching their own fortunes plummet while the riches of the wealthiest few continued to grow, and the economic landscape today, when people work longer and harder for less, and the gap between richest and poorest steadily widens. The point for Green isn't whether the past was better or worse than today, but how it *relates* to today — what the past has to say about the present.

There's a mirror for today in 1934, and there's a mirror for Leo in his uncle Jack. Hard times forced Jack into just as lonely and isolated an existence as Leo's, cut off from his family, alone in the world, but what Leo notices in his uncle and the other men of the Depression is a kind of unbeaten hopefulness, an optimism that he hasn't known for too long, and spending time among them reawakens his own capacity for hope. Leo's journey into the past becomes an archetypal trip into the underworld, a voyage of self-discovery; in fact, throughout the book Green frames Leo's quest in terms of a descent, with images of archaeological excavation, caverns, strata. "I was being drawn down," Leo says at one point, "led beneath the apparent schematics of things, into the subterranean world of some dark truth."

It's in that subterranean world, the past, that *Shadow of Ashland* really comes alive, partly because of the irrepressible thrill of time travel, and partly because Leo's character blossoms during his experience of the past. By the time Leo learns the fate of his uncle, we've come to know him well enough to be fully involved,

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and the final few chapters crackle with well-wrung emotion. Though on the level of sheer drama *Shadow of Ashland* may not be as compelling a book as *Time and Again*, its treatment of the past as the fount of the present, and as a source of illumination and self-knowledge, makes it far weightier in the end. I do wish Green had developed his scenario and his character in more detail from the start, but I suppose it's a light criticism when the worst you can say about a book is that you only wish there had been more of it.

Jack Cady's latest novel, *The Off Season*, presents a very different sort of mingling of past and present, but from the outset some similarities between it and *Shadow of Ashland* stand out sharply, and they're more than merely superficial. We're brought to the fictitious town of Point Vestal (loosely modeled on Point Townsend, Washington, Cady's own place of residence), where Victorian ghosts wander the streets and reenact their melodramatic deaths, past and present overlap seamlessly, and the old Parsonage building moves itself from place to place as if at whim.

"'The key to Point Vestal,'" says one character, "'is that all the time is happening some of the time. At least that's the theory.'" Into town in the fall of 1973 comes Joel-Andrew, a miracle-working itinerant preacher, and his dancing cat Obed, fluent in several languages. Upon his arrival Joel-Andrew has unwittingly pulled August Starling — the town's mad amoral capitalist, consigned to an asylum in 1888 — out of the time loop in which he had been stuck, loosing him on Point Vestal once again, and the rest of the book follows the town's scattered attempts to get rid of Starling, while Starling for his part learns the ins and outs of the 20th century and begins to build another business empire for himself, bringing fast food joints and Mafia gunmen (among other ills) into town for the first time.

Cady's prose could hardly be more different from Green's — it's lush and colorful, playful and breezy — and Point Vestal's wacky absurdities are far from the faded realism of Green's Ashland, but at a deeper level both books share something of spirit. Both emphasize the congruities between past and present, the relationships between them, rather than treating them as separate and distinct entities. Cady literalizes the idea with his ghosts existing alongside the living, but the past is just as tangible a part of Ashland, its echoes informing every aspect of the present. And in *The Off Season* as in *Shadow of*

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Ashland, the past provides illumination of both private and public identity; as the group of five citizens who are writing the account proceed, they begin to reflect not only on Point Vestal, but on themselves as well: "'It is a history,'" one of them says, "'but it's becoming *our* history, not just town history.'"

It might be hard to imagine that a book with the tone of *The Off Season* could share much thematically with one so stark and stern as Green's, but it works because Cady has an expert control over his material, maintaining just enough of a foundation of seriousness to keep the absurdity from getting out of hand. And also because Cady, like Green, steadfastly avoids becoming too simplistically judgmental about either the past or the present; though *The Off Season* is continuously concerned with good and evil, morals and ethics, it never falls back on simple formulae. At some moments Point Vestal's Victorian past seems the worse, filled as it was with slave traders, smugglers, and opium dealers; at others it's the modern world that's awful, with its garish media, faceless franchises, and superficiality. Point Vestal often seems poised between these two extremes, neither fully Victorian nor fully contemporary, yet even this middle ground doesn't guarantee virtue, as the behavior of the townsfolk in the later chapters will attest.

Toward the end, though, Cady's control seems to tire a bit; the absurdities threaten to overwhelm the story, and the moral conflict threatens to simplify itself into far-too-familiar a form. As the battle between Joel-Andrew and August Starling heats up, it gets very noisy; at one point a gunfight escalates into a frenzy of missile-firings from offshore Navy ships, and the subtler tale beneath becomes harder to discern. All manner of things battle in the air: "The Parsonage — which still proudly wore its red-lettered Strike Headquarters sign — hung in the sky and slowly circled the blimp, while beneath both blimp and Parsonage Navy frigates cruised in tight circles of hard-helmed confusion." But just when all the ballyhoo is at its height, Cady rescues the book with a well-orchestrated shift of gears, bringing it all back down to the quieter level where it had begun, and the battle proceeds to resolve. If anything, it resolves too quickly and neatly, but that, I think, only confirms my sense that all that racket wasn't really necessary in the first place.

I don't want to give too much away, but I'll assure you that, out of all that noise, *The Off Season* winds

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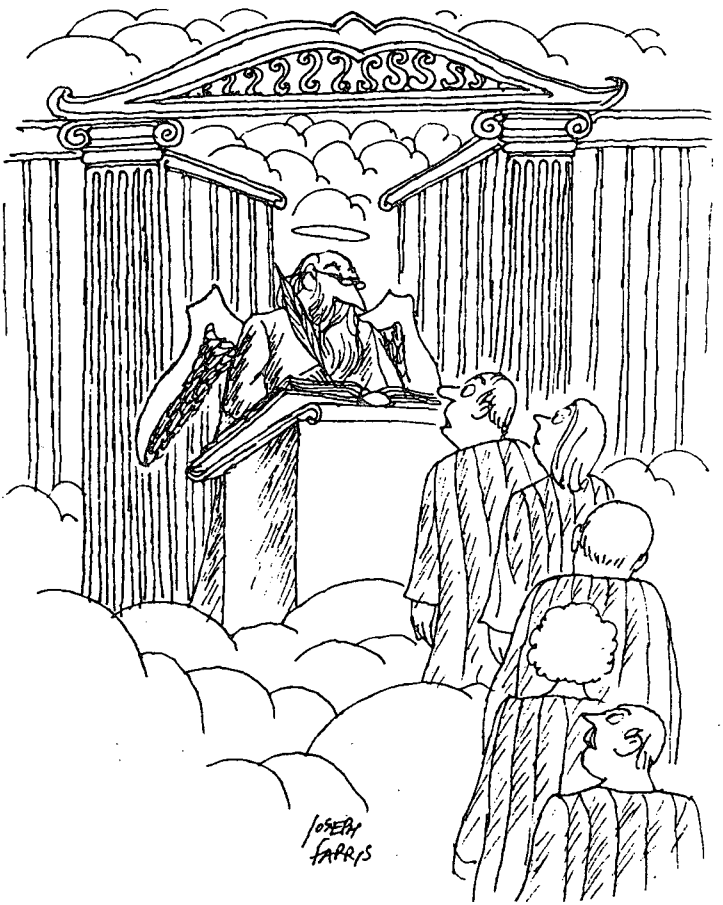
up in its final fifteen pages with some of its very best moments, and its final few paragraphs ring with piercing wisdom. It's a greatly refreshing book, leaving you feeling wide awake and sharp. Both *The Off Season* and *Shadow of Ashland* steer clear of the kinds of oversimplication that afflict so many discussions of the past and the present these days; Cady and Green never use one era to bash the other, but instead reveal the constant dance the present must do with the past on its way to the future. They address the world not as they think it should be, but as it really is.



"*You want my* social security number?"

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Wild Hunt, by Jane Yolen, Harcourt Brace & Co., 1995, 138pp, $17.00 Hardcover

THERE ARE two houses, two boys...or perhaps they're aspects of the same house and boy. There is a white cat who might also be an aspect of the White Goddess, summer incarnate. A horned huntsman, cloaked in winter, and his hunt, one hound short of the seven he needs. A struggle between huntsman and cat that tears a hole in the veil separating the two houses, allowing the boys to step through the fabric and meet....

Aided and abetted by artist Francisco Mora, Jane Yolen (surely one of the great voices of North American literature) clears her throat and draws us into another story, as effortlessly as ever, but this time with a marked difference. Her prose is still that inimitable blend of matter-of-fact and lyric. Mystery still resonates beneath the simple unfolding of events. This is fairy tale and myth, seen through contemporary eyes, but the story isn't as straightforward as Yolen's work has often been in the past. There are threads that remain tangled when the story is done, puzzles that readers must decipher for themselves.

Neither of which is lazy writing on Yolen's part. The meat of the story is here on its bones, mysterious start to satisfying finish; she's merely allowing us to meet her halfway in terms of what it all means, allowing our perceptions of the mysteries as much validity as her own which, in turn, has us invest more of ourselves in the story. This is hard to pull off — give us too much, and the impact is lost; too little, and nothing makes sense — but when it works, as it does here, it makes for a far richer reading experience than a more traditionally told story.

I find it particularly gratifying that a writer of Yolen's talents and stature is still willing to experiment — though I shouldn't be surprised. Her willingness to push the boundaries,

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even at this point in her career when one might assume she doesn't have to, proves both her talent and the fact that her stature has been earned.

Spyder, by Norman Partridge, Subterranean Press, 1995, 22pp, $8.00 Chapbook
Out There in the Darkness, by Ed Gorman, Subterranean Press, 1995, 31pp, $8.00 Chapbook

This is something I always like to see: affordable collectibles. In this case, small saddle-stitched chapbooks with striking covers, numbered and signed, and only $8.00, which is certainly within the price range of most budgets.

Spyder is a thinly disguised take on the ultimate (at least, in media terms) rebel, James Dean. Partridge doesn't name his doomed actor, but he does a fine job in postulating a supernatural reason behind his success and also his "immortality" in terms of movie myth. What I found most interesting about the style Partridge uses here is that while the story is told from a first person perspective (a point of view that normally creates an intimacy between narrator and reader), here he achieves a distancing effect that proves necessary to the story. The narrator isn't particularly likable, but we remain interested in the story he has to tell. I doubt it would have been as successful if Partridge had also tried to make him sympathetic.

I won't tell you how it all turns out, but the clever ending will certainly appeal to conspiracy buffs.

Out There in the Darkness is the longer of the two chapbooks, not only in page count, but also because the smaller typeface crams more words on a page — perhaps too many, depending on your eyesight. But it's well worth the effort.

Gorman teases with a slight unresolved supernatural element, but he needn't have bothered. He has a powerhouse of a story to offer that doesn't require juicing up. Here's the set-up:

Four middle-aged white collar workers are having a poker game one night. It's Aaron's house and he's also the narrator, a well-meaning, ordinary guy, just like his friends. They're in the attic, where the card table's set up, waiting for Bob to come back from the bathroom on the first floor, when they hear noises from downstairs. Someone's broken in and attacked Bob. They catch one of the burglars while the other gets away. Aaron wants to call the police immediately, but a couple of the others want to get the name of his accomplice out of their captive — and maybe the names of some of the other people who have been vandalizing the neighbourhood.

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The burglar gets tied up and put in the basement. An argument ensues, but Aaron decides to let them ask the man one question before calling the police. In the meantime, the burglar has worked free of his ropes. He bolts, Aaron tackles him and the burglar hits his head on one of the steps of the basement stairs. And dies.

The first big mistake was not calling the police right away. The four men, afraid of what unpleasant media and police scrutiny might do to their private lives and jobs, now make a second mistake and dispose of the body themselves. But at least it's over. Or so it seems until they begin getting mysterious phone calls and one of them dies in a mysterious "accidental" death.

The straightforward way I've laid out the set-up above can't begin to describe the complexity of emotions that Gorman's story calls up. In a time when crime and violence are on such an upsurge, he's playing into our worst fears, but not gratuitously. Instead the story, while riveting in its own right, also opens up a dialogue on the rights and wrongs of what we do, and are capable of doing, when the rules break down and we have no one to count on except for ourselves and our friends.

The pacing, characterization and emotional payoffs of Gorman's novella show him working at the top of his form. And that supernatural element I mentioned earlier? The tease is that the burglars might not be human. The real horror is that perhaps they are all too human.

The Tower of Beowulf, by Parke Godwin, Morrow, 1995, 256pp, $22.00, Hardcover

Possibly one of the best-known (at least by title) and least-read classics is the epic Anglo-Saxon poem, *Beowulf*, written by that most prolific of writers, Anonymous. Much of the story is based around the rampage of the monstrous Grendel in the mead-hall of Hrothgar, king of the Danes on the island of Zealand. The rampage finally comes to an end when the monster, and later his mother, are slain by Beowulf, the nephew of King Hygelac of the Geats whose kingdom was in Sweden, facing that of the Danes.

The story in its original form is a little complicated. The narrative isn't straightforward as in a contemporary novel, but bounces about in prophecies and retrospects, interspersed with various lamentations, speeches of celebration, descriptions of feasts, and of course, genealogies. None of which should put off a potential reader — for the style has its own charm and

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benefits, should one give the work the time it requires — but its pacing is not the sort that sits well with a modern readership weaned on television and film.

Beowulf has subsequently appeared in other books, the most notable being Henry Treece's wonderful *The Green Man* and John Gardner's *Grendel*, but he's a peripheral character at best in both. He gets far better treatment in Godwin's retelling of the old story.

Parke Godwin is another of those fascinating writers I like to talk about in this column, the sort who refuses to be pigeon-holed, writing everything from horror and contemporary fantasy to satire, space opera and the historical fantasies that he's perhaps best-known for, retellings of the great mythic matter of Britain: King Arthur, St. Patrick and most recently, Robin Hood. What's so compelling about these books isn't simply the fact that Godwin delivers a cracking good yarn, but that he allows us to see the well-known figures in a new light, illuminating their characters in a manner other writers haven't...or can't.

The Tower of Beowulf is an excellent example of this strength of his as he takes us into the points of view (and thereby explores the motivations) of Beowulf, Grendel, Sigyn (Grendel's mother) and even Loki, the Norse god of mischief. The end result is a lack of real villains. We have, instead, opposing points of view that only appear evil depending on the perspective. Except for Loki's amoral shenanigans, the clash between the characters is the stuff of tragedy because the reader can so readily understand both sides of the argument.

The other successful element of this book has become almost a trademark of how Godwin handles this sort of story: he gives us not simply the lead-up to the great deed or the known elements of the character's mythic history, but also how the character ended up in the situation in the first place — and what happens after — both of which are often far more interesting. When that is added to the care Godwin brings to the story's background and historical setting, the end result is a novel of great depth and heart. And it's why Godwin's books are unquestionably among the best such retellings one is likely to find.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Brief Reviews: Books

The Shape-Changer's Wife, by Sharon Shinn, Ace, 1995, 200pp, $4.99

IN HER first novel, Ms. Shinn takes a traditional romance and wraps it in a fantasy. The basic story is familiar: a young man (Aubrey) falls in love with an unattainable woman (Lilith). In keeping with the fantasy elements, the woman is the wife of Aubrey's mentor, the shape-changer Glyrenden.

The book starts slowly, introducing the characters and their world, while providing only vague hints of Aubrey's dilemma. However, the second half moves much quicker, as complications beset Aubrey, and he discovers the true nature and scope of the problem he faces.

The resolution is satisfactory, with a rousing battle of wizards in the climactic scene. The epilogue, though unnecessary, is too short to detract from the overall favorable impression.

Blood: A Southern Fantasy, by Michael Moorcock, AvoNova, 1995, 352pp, $22

Moorcock claims in the prologue of *Blood* to be editing the papers of Edwin Begg, the famous Clapham Antichrist. The book is the love story of Jack Karaquazian and Colinda Dovero for a while, and then it is the adventures of Sam Oakenhurst and the Rose, and then it is the story of all of them along with an assortment of "characters" from somewhere else. Jack, Colinda, Sam, and in most ways the Rose, too, are gamblers (or jugadors) in a world where "the white races had fallen into decadence and other races had risen to build a more dynamic civilization." A seemingly limitless energy source arose as "color spots," and as the engineers drilled for more color, they opened the Biloxi Fault. "From then on, the process was irreversible. It seemed the fabric of reality shredded and warped, growing almost senile in its whimsicalities." This is the first of three books in which the forces of Chaos battle the forces of Singularity across a multiverse.

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One for the Morning Glory, John Barnes, Tor, 1996, 320pp, $22.95

One cannot fall into this lissome book as one would a more standard fantasy, only to emerge blinking later with the feeling of having been transported: Barnes's use of the language is too wicked and mischievous. Just when one is tempted to join the flow of story, one encounters sentences such as this: "He was dressed from head to toe in the soft hide of zwieback and gazebo.... There was a great rattle as he came in, for on his chest he wore crossed swashes of pismires, and on his back he carried a festoon and a double bladed ax." Such wordplay leaches all starch of seriousness from the work, and jars one out of the story while one appreciates its cleverness.

Too, there is a strong tendency in the characters to realize they are in a story, and to consult older stories to find out what might happen next in theirs.

This book is an intellectual treat that defies sentimental identification. It hides wisdom in foolery as it enters the usual fantasy formula and comes out the other end with the usual sum, at once amplified and diminished by its refusal to take itself seriously.

Bellwether, by Connie Willis, Bantam Books, 1996, 256pp, $11.95

In *Bellwether*, Connie Willis has crafted a perfect little gem.

Sandra Foster is a statistician who is trying to discover how fads begin so that her company, HiTek, can predict them and perhaps influence them. Through a series of mishaps, most caused by her incompetent assistant Flip, Foster ends up working on a chaos theory project with Bennett O'Reilly, who happens to be immune to trends. The plot follows a traditional romance arch, but nothing else about the book is traditional. History of science and fads mix with a liberal dose of chaos theory and much too much information about sheep to make *Bellwether* more of an intellectual exercise than an emotional one.

The chaotic situation works well with Willis's madcap style. The analysis of humanity and the human condition are dead-on. The only unnecessary jolt comes from setting the book in the very near future, an unnecessary fact the reader doesn't realize until the middle of the book. But that's a minor quibble. *Bellwether* shows Willis in top form — again.

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Robert J. Levy works as an executive editor at United Features Syndicate, and has sold poems to most of the major poetry markets in the nation. His short fiction has appeared primarily in F&SF, and is marked by a skewed sense of humor.

As in the following story. Imagine, if you will, this story filmed in stylish black-and-white, an Orson Welles narration or perhaps Bogart in the starring role. Add a damsel in distress, a library and you have "Jack Stacey, A.S.B.R."

Jack Stacey, A.S.B.R.

By Robert J. Levy

I WAS BUSY ALPHABETIZING books on Milton's punctuation when I looked up from the card catalog into an imposing pair of horn-rims. It was a woman, and she was scared. She had the haunted, hunted look of a heroine from 19th-century fiction. Tess, Anna, or that Bennett girl.

"Jack Stacey?" she whispered.

"Well, it's not Italo Calvino," I said. I like to lead with a joke. It puts people at ease. But she wasn't having any.

"I was given your name," she continued hesitantly.

I knew what she wanted, of course, but she had to admit it first herself. That was part of the process.

"I...I'm a voracious reader," she said. "At least I was. I used to finish two, three novels a week. Not your average page-turners either. Solid stuff. Dickens, Melville, Dostoyevski."

"Interesting," I said, "but how can I help you?"

"A month ago, I picked up *The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton's acid-tinged portrayal of turn-of-the-century New York society. After a few pages

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I grew dizzy. My eyes started to close. I...I was..."

"Bored?" I ventured.

"Yes!" she said excitedly — and too loudly. A chorus of shushes echoed around the reading room. She lowered her voice: "Can you help me? My friend said, for a price, you'll customize a reading list."

I eyed her carefully as she warmed to her story. Her cheeks had flushed red, and her hair had come undone. A touch of Brontë's Catherine played about her face. There were fires banked deep down in this bibliophile.

"Yes, in addition to being a librarian here at the Queensborough Branch I am registered with the A.S.B.R."

She looked confused.

"American Society of Book Recommenders," I said.

"Well," she said, breathless, "Will you?"

"It's not as simple as it sounds," I began. "The first thing is to admit you're suffering from reader's block. You've already taken that step. But now I'll need to learn what makes your literary clock tick, what sort of prose style quickens your pulse, what kind of plot twists give you cold sweats. Finally, I'll write you a list. My selections may seem odd, even perverse. You may say, He doesn't understand my whole literary gestalt, I'm going to hate these books. But you have to put yourself completely in my hands. And even then, there's still no guarantee."

I paused. "Are you ready to do all that?"

There was a moment of indecision as she rolled her unread copy of *The New York Review of Books* into an even tighter tube.

"Yes," she said. "I'm desperate."

I discovered my unique talent early on. A precocious kid, I always had my nose in print. Anything at all. Dictionaries. Encyclopedias. Comics. Recipes. Laundry tickets. Ingredients lists on cereal boxes. I loved words. I ate them for breakfast, lunch and dinner. But it wasn't just that.

I remember the first glimmer of it in the school yard behind P.S. 220. Mikey Warshawer was sitting near the swings, looking pretty hangdog. So I asked him, What gives? Mikey coughed up the whole story. Seemed he couldn't find any comics to read. Said he would open up a *Superman* or *Green Lantern* and nothing happened. He wasn't being transported outside of himself. No magic. Zero. Zip. Nada.

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Now I'd known Mikey through three grades. He was a good sort, a little prone to mischief, but with a notion of the transcendent and a sensitivity to the great themes. Life. Death. The ultimate meaning of it all.

"Mikey," I said to him, "Ever try reading the *Dr. Strange* comics?"

He looked up at me, suddenly interested, new life in his expression. "Any good?"

"Well," I said, "They're not everyone's cup of tea, but I think you'll really go for the unique melding of stylized adventure and occult symbolism."

And I was right. I've always been right. It's — for want of a better word — my genius. I can size up a person and immediately know what they'll love to read.

Sounds wonderful, right? A great way to win friends and influence people? Sure, but it's also a way to alienate folks. It frightens them, the second sight. Maybe they accept you for awhile, but soon they start to act kind of prickly when you're around. They feel like you're reading their minds. And the thing is, you are.

I lost some buddies this way in my youth. Gus "Great Books" Wolinsky got so frustrated with my unerring ability to choose volumes he loved that he purposely began reading novels I assured him he would hate. The last time I saw him he was reading all of James Fenimore Cooper. The experience soured him on literature and learning. He became an embittered elementary school teacher notorious for forcing his classes to take *Evangeline* seriously.

I soon realized my abilities made me a pariah in the everyday world. People objected to my habit of pulling books out of their hands in public and replacing them with others of my own choosing. Sometimes they became insulted when I saw through their intellectual pretensions. ("You won't like *Nostromo*," I'd implore. "Sure, it's masterpiece. But *you* won't like it. Try the latest Michener instead. It's exactly the kind of stuff you'll enjoy!")

Clearly I had to hide myself from the prying eyes of the world, and the best camouflage was the library. There I could recommend books to my heart's content, and nobody would be the wiser.

Following the initial meeting with my client, I conducted an intensive series of interviews and phone conversations with the distressed woman. I formed a pretty good picture of her pathology. Language itself had become an anathema to her. It began to affect her work. She couldn't bring herself to look at the briefest memos. She would surreptitiously throw away correspondence rather than read it. When she typed letters she left out every other word.

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I knew what had to be done, and I knew it was going to be tough on her. I called her one evening. "I want you to buy a copy of the revised version of Stephen King's *The Stand*, and read the whole thing."

There was dead quiet on the other end of the line. Finally, a small voice whispered: "You can't be serious. It's 1,400 pages of...of schlock."

"Call me back when you've finished," I replied, and hung up.

Textual immersion therapy. Force the blocked patient to read something, anything, and make any subsequent interaction with the book recommender contingent on completion of the assigned material. This compels the blocked reader to renew contact with words in order to continue contact with the recommender.

She phoned a few days later.

"I can't believe you made me read that...thing!" she said. "I thought you were supposed to recommend books I would like."

"All part of the treatment. But you're forgetting something."

"What?"

"You did, in fact, actually *read* it!"

There was a stunned silence, and then a sob of relief.

From this point on it was largely mop-up work. I soon presented her with my reading list. It was a wildly divergent assortment, but, then again, she was a woman of sharp contrasts:

Molloy, Samuel Beckett
Clan of the Cave Bear, Jean Auel
The Once and Future King, T.H. White
Pippi Longstocking, Astrid Lindgren
Tractatus Logico Philosophicus, Ludwig Wittgenstein
The Color Me Beautiful Make-Up Book, Carole Jackson
Dr. Faustus, Thomas Mann
Destiny, Sally Beauman
Monadology, Gottfried Leibnitz
Bill, the Galactic Hero, Harry Harrison

Perplexed by my choices, she nonetheless plowed through each of these texts over the next few weeks. Soon enough a marvelous transformation had taken place. Her pallor had given way to a ruddy glow. There was a new spring in her step, and, on one occasion, I even detected an attempt at flirtation. Her outlook on life improved. She showed renewed interest in ideas and herself. For example, while *Monadology* went a long way toward convincing her that

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the universe was composed of discrete particles, *The Color Me Beautiful Make-Up Book* made her realize she had been employing far too muted a color palette for her skin tone.

Our final meeting took place where it all began — in the library. I was in the suspense section shelving books; I'd just finished the G's, my arms aching as I tucked away the last Grisham. I heard footsteps behind me.

"Jack," she said breathily.

I turned to face her. She looked...how to describe it? Alluring, certainly. But more than that. Like a new woman. A reader reborn. I motioned her to a secluded carrel.

Her moist lips glistened in the soft glow of the reading lamp. A copy of Duras' *The Lover* peeked seductively from her partially opened handbag. I sensed something more than the usual reader-recommender relationship. There was a tremor in her voice that I recognized: She had fallen for me. And hard. It was common enough in my line of work. Restore the love of literature to enough young women and you're bound to come across a few who want to remunerate you with a little skin candy. Still, I was a professional.

"I don't know where I would be without you, Jack," she said, her voice smooth as Updike's prose.

"Me? I was merely your guide, kid. Your Virgil in a journey through one woman's personal hell. But, ultimately, you did it yourself. It took real guts."

"Oh Jack," she implored. "I'm scared. I'll feel lost without you. You're so well...read."

She pressed my hand. The reader-recommender bond was always a hard one to break; the truth was, I wasn't so sure I wanted to this time. Just then, I noticed she had borrowed some books from the library's collection. I couldn't help observe that several titles were all wrong for her. I started to gesture towards them. She looked deep into my eyes.

"No," I said, perhaps as much to myself as to her. "My work is done. There are books out there, sweetheart, thousands of them — hardbound, soft-cover, mass-market, trade — and they're waiting for you. And there are other poor saps who've lost the love of literature. They need me."

"You're...such a lonely man, Jack."

"It goes with the territory."

She stood abruptly, a single tear brimming her eyelid. She gave me a final, lingering glance — one that spoke, well, volumes. Then she turned on her heels and walked out of my life forever. ☙

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It has been years since Lisa Tuttle graced the pages of F&SF. *Many of her recent short stories have gone to* Interzone *in the United Kingdom, her adopted home. Lisa has lived in the U.K. since 1980. After ten years in London, she moved to Scotland with her husband and young daughter. Recently Lisa's been writing fantasy for younger readers. Her first young adult novel,* A Panther in Argyll, *has just appeared from Methuen.*

"'Meeting the Muse,'" she writes, "is actually a piece from a recently completed (and as yet unsold) novel called The Pillow Friend *— however it's not by coincidence that it works as a self-contained short story, because in the novel it is a short story written by the main character... although it also reflects something of her life."*

Meeting the Muse

By Lisa Tuttle

IT BEGAN, SHE FELL IN love, with the image of a man.

As a child she had seen his face for the first time in black and white, hardly bigger than a postage stamp: *young poet* said a line below the grainy dots of newsprint. So this was a poet, she thought, gazing at the shadowy representation of dreamy eyes and shaggy hair, tinglingly aware that something had entered and lodged in her heart, like the Snow Queen's love for little Kay.

Seven years later, in the poetry section of the college bookstore, she picked up a book with the title *The Memory of Trees*. The author's name, Graham Storey, seemed familiar; she glanced at the back cover for a clue, and saw his face again.

Something turned over inside her as she stared at the picture of a poet no longer so young.

Gone was the Beatles hairstyle; his hair was cropped now. The eyes that stared out at something far beyond her had a dreaminess contradicted by the fierceness of the rest of his face, the thin, tight-lipped mouth, the jut of nose and chin. There was a ferocity in him, but she sensed it would be directed

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more at himself than anyone else. She sensed enduring sadness, a pain held tightly within.

She bought the book, of course, although her budget did not allow it; she could do without a few meals if she had to. She read it straight through for the first time that night, alone in bed, with an intensity of concentration she seldom brought to her studies. She read each poem many times, until it was part of her.

Previously a lazy, erratic student, although bright, now, driven by her heart, she became a scholar. The university library had a copy of his first collection of poetry, but she also discovered poems, letters, even essays and reviews he had written by combing through every poetry-related publication of the past decade that she could find in the stacks. She followed cross-references and hunches until she had compiled an impressive dossier on him, not only his work and influences, but his life, the man himself. She learned from a chance reference in one book that he had been in correspondence with W.H. Auden — and that his letters, Graham Storey's actual letters, were in a collection in the Humanities Research Center on the University of Texas campus — and she, as a student, had access to them.

She sat by herself in a small, cool, well-lighted room with a box-file open on the table and picked up the typewritten pages in her hands, raised them to her face, inhaling with eyes closed. What might be left, besides the words, indentations and ink on paper, after so many years? Cell fragments from the skin of his hands, a hair, a trace of cigarette smoke...? She stared and stared at the signature in blue ink, the small, cramped hand. At first, the formality of his full name, but the last two letters were signed simply *G*.

How that initial reverberated, how personal it became, how it haunted her! The fact that it was one of her own initials did not detract but seemed to suggest a connection between them, proof they had something in common.

Her handwriting altered under the impress of his. At first it was evident only in the way she wrote the letter G, but soon she began to change the way she signed her name, aspiring to make her signature more like his, and then, unconsciously (for she had too small a sample of his to be able, consciously, to copy it) the rest of her handwriting shifted in accord with her signature, becoming smaller, neater, more precise.

She could not have said, later, when the plan began, but it was only natural, loving him as she did, to want to meet him, and to try to think of ways. She entertained fantasies of meeting him by chance: she would be

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walking along the Drag one day, and there he'd be, walking toward her. The English Department did sponsor a series of readings by established poets; it was not impossible that they might invite Graham Storey. Or maybe he would read one of her poems, several of which had been published in various little magazines, and be so impressed that he'd write her a letter.

But she knew these were childish fantasies. Sometimes when she had spent too long alone the vast, sad truth would nearly overwhelm her. No matter how much she knew about him or how much more she learned, it would bring her no closer to him while he continued unaware of her existence.

Time passed, and she went on loving him while she got her degree and got a job. She went on living in Austin, in the same rather run-down apartment building near the University, and continued to socialize with the same sort of people, even sleeping with one or two of them, while still dreaming of the faraway English poet and the very different life they might have together.

More than once she started a letter to him, but she always drew back from mailing them, always in the end deciding to wait until she could meet him face to face. Then, she felt sure, although she was certainly old enough to know better, she would find a way to make him love her. So she dreamed, and wrote, and worked hard, lived frugally, and saved every penny she could toward the journey of a lifetime.

Standing in Victoria Station, alone amid the alien crowd, unreal-feeling from jet-lag and lack of sleep, she stood and turned the tissue-thin pages of a telephone book. The sight of his name thrilled her, as always, like a familiar touch. *Storey, G.* All at once she felt more at home, able to deal with the problem of finding herself somewhere to stay in this huge, foreign city.

The next day she set off for Harrow-on-the-Hill, which sounded to her as if it should be inhabited by hobbits, but was apparently no more than one of the farflung tendrils of London's contemporary sprawl, easily accessible by the Metropolitan Line. His street she had located in her newly purchased *London A to Z* and she felt confident of finding her way there from the station.

She had no plans for what she would say or do after she had made her way to his door. She was praying that magic would strike, that he would look at her and feel what she had felt when she'd first set eyes on his face.

It was a sunny day, but breezy and not very warm, even though it was June. She felt glad for her cotton jacket as she walked up the hill into the wind.

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Even before she saw the number and was sure, she had recognized his little white cottage with the honeysuckle twining around the green door. She knocked, and both her breath and her heart seemed to stop while she waited for the reply.

A woman opened the door. She was about thirty, attractive in a strong-featured, rather exotic way, with kohl-rimmed eyes and long, dark hair. "Yes?"

"Does Graham Storey live here?"

"Why?"

"I wanted to see him." From the way the woman looked at her, she had the sudden, despairing conviction that she would not be allowed in. To this woman, whatever her connection to the poet, she was just some person from Porlock. "I'd like to meet him. Please, won't you tell him, won't you ask him — not if he's working of course. Don't interrupt him. But if I could come back later, I wouldn't take up too much of his time..."

"You're American, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Here on a visit?"

She nodded. "It's my first time."

"How do you know Graham?"

"I don't. Not personally. Just his work. I've admired it for so long..."

The woman smiled suddenly. "Oh, you're one of his readers! Well, he's not here right now, but — would you like to come in? I can show you round."

This was not at all as she had hoped it would be. "Maybe I'd better come back when he's in."

"Oh, he won't mind me showing you round. I'm sure he'd want me to. After you've come so far, I couldn't just send you away again with nothing. Come in, come in."

"Really, I'd like to meet him."

"Then you can come back again in a few days, when he's here. Better ring first to make sure he's in. But as long as you're here, come in for a cup of tea. Wouldn't you like to see where his wonderful poems get written?"

It would have been too awkward to refuse. Following her inside, she wondered about the woman who played at being keeper of the shrine. In her hippy, gypsyish clothes — cheesecloth blouse and long madras skirt, silver bangles on her arms and a ring on every finger — she was unlikely as either a housekeeper or a secretary. She knew he wasn't married, but asked with false naiveté, "Are you Mrs. Storey?"

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The woman smiled. "I'm sorry, I should have introduced myself. I'm his girlfriend, Amy Carrick."

There was something in the woman's proud smile and the little toss of her head that made her suspect she wouldn't have made such a claim in the poet's presence.

"Where is he now? Will he be back soon?"

"He's gone away for a few days, walking in Scotland. He does that sometimes, when he needs to be alone for inspiration. That's how poets are. Wouldn't you like to see his study, where the magic happens? Just through here. This is his desk, this is his chair. He always writes long-hand, on this sort of pad. There are his pencils, and a rubber, and a couple of biros, but he's taken his favorite pen away with him."

It was like being shown around a museum by a too-officious curator, facts forced upon her and never allowed a moment for thought or a meaningful private discovery. Although she knew she was being silly, she found herself disbelieving everything the woman said. No, this was not the room where he created his poems. Perhaps he wrote letters here, on that old manual typewriter shoved to the back of the desk, or typed out the final versions, but the poems had not been written at that desk, with Graham Storey in that chair.

"Go on, I can see you're dying to try it. Go ahead, I won't tell him, sit down, see what it feels like to sit in the poet's chair!"

She backed away. "Could I use your bathroom, please?"

Amy led her to the other end of the small house, where the bathroom was beside the kitchen. "I'll make us a pot of tea while you're freshening up."

She ran the water to mask any sound, and had a look around the bathroom. There were no signs of a woman's occupancy, no makeup, moisturizer, or tampons, not even a toothbrush in the mug beside the sink. Only one person lived here, and he was away.

"Why don't you take a seat in the lounge, make yourself at home. I'll be in with the tea in a couple of minutes," called Amy as she passed.

There was one armchair and a sofa in the room called the lounge, and by the evidence, a crumpled tissue and a paperback lying open on the seat, it was obvious that the other woman had been sitting in the armchair earlier. Perversely ("make yourself at home!"), she chose to sit on the chair, lifting the book (*A Bouquet of Barbed Wire* by Andrea Newman) and tissue and setting them on the nearest surface, then settling herself, wriggling her

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bottom deeper into the already flattened cushion. As she did so she felt something small and hard under her. Probably a button or a coin, she thought as she raised a buttock and slipped one hand beneath the cushion.

She had found a small gold key attached to a thin gold ring. The key seemed too small and delicate to be of any practical use, so perhaps it was the sort of charm that more usually would be worn as part of a bracelet or necklace. Without thinking, she slipped it onto her ring finger and it was a perfect fit. She turned it so that the key lay in the palm of her hand, and she closed her hand around it just as Amy came in with a tea-tray.

"Here we are! Milk or lemon?"

"Lemon, please."

"I thought so. I've noticed Americans don't often take milk in their tea. Graham never takes tea at all. He's a coffee drinker, but it has to be strong."

She craved all such details of his life out of habit, but resented this woman for being the source. Anyway, she might be lying. She certainly didn't live here with Graham as she had implied. "Have you been to America?"

"Me? Oh, no. I used to work in a cafe where we had a lot of American tourists coming in, that's where I noticed. Graham says noticing little details like that is really important in a poet."

"Are you a poet?"

"I try," she said, casting her eyes down, more coy than modest. Then a thought alarmed her, and her eyes came up quick and fierce. "Are you?"

"Oh, goodness no. I'm just a reader; I can't write." The lie soothed whatever dark suspicion had briefly disturbed Amy's complacency. She knew she'd been right in her reflexive, almost instinctive, lie. She didn't want this woman knowing too much about her.

When she left — as soon as she had finished her tea — she was still wearing the key-ring. Distrusting the other woman as she did she couldn't bring herself to hand it over to her. She justified this with the thought that all the other rings on Amy's hands were silver, so this was unlikely to be hers. This might belong to Graham's *real* girlfriend, in which case it would be much better to give it to him when she came back another day. After all, it was his house she had found it in.

But as soon as she was outside on the street she was gripped by panic, realizing that however she justified it, she had just stolen a piece of jewelry. She should have shoved it back under the cushion again before she left —

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what had possessed her to put it on in the first place? The panic died away as she accepted the fact that it was too late now, and she'd just have to try to explain herself when she met the poet. Her hand made a fist around the fragile key as she walked away.

SHE FELL ASLEEP early and woke, disoriented but wide awake, just before dawn. It was too early to have breakfast or go anywhere, nothing would be open, and although she would have enjoyed just walking through the streets of London she was afraid it wouldn't be safe. With a sigh she reached for the book she had been reading the night before, but soon cast it aside. Her dreams had been more interesting, unusually vivid and strange. There had been one scene in particular...

Thinking about it, she remembered something she'd seen walking back from the poet's house in Harrow, and made a connection. Words hung in her mind, glittering slightly, suggesting new connections, conjunctions, interesting clashes. She scrabbled in her bag for her notebook and a pen.

By the time the maid knocked on her door several hours later she had completed a poem, and she had the thrilling feeling that it was the best she'd ever written.

During the next few days she saw the sights of London and she wrote. She wrote in the early mornings in her room, she wrote in cafes, tea-shops, and restaurants in the afternoons, and in pubs or her narrow little hotel room in the evenings. She had never known anything like this overpowering burst of creativity, and she'd seldom been so happy. Writing poetry had always been a struggle for her, and the results of that struggle usually mediocre. Now everything was changed, as if a rusty old lock had been oiled, the key turned smoothly and the door was finally, fully open. The poems were not easy to write, they didn't spring into her head full-blown, she had to work at them, shaping and re-shaping the initial idea, but it was like working in clear daylight after bumbling around in the dark for so long. She had something to say now, and the words to say it. The skill had come, perhaps, from all the years of practice, of looking and listening, reading and trying to write, but why here, why now?

She developed a superstition about the key-ring, which had not been off her finger since she found it, but it was not something she was able to put into words — it would have sounded too silly. Yet she had not gone back to

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Harrow-on-the-Hill, or even thought about it, during her week of writing, and now, as she began to think about Graham Storey again, feeling that old familiar tug of longing, the thought of having to give the ring up, to give it back to him, was almost painful enough to make her abandon her original plan to meet him.

Finally she shut herself into a telephone box and dialed the number she knew by heart although she'd never used it. A man's voice answered, repeating the last four digits she had dialed. Unable to think of any response, she hung up.

She put all her recent poems into a big brown envelope and set off for Harrow. She didn't know what she would say, but she would let him see that she wore the ring, let him read her poems — and then he would decide her fate. Standing before his green door, her hand poised to knock, something else seemed to take over and decide for her. Instead of knocking she bent down and leaned a little forward and pushed the envelope containing her poems through the letter-slot. Feeling as free, happy and satisfied as when she read through a poem she had just written and found it good, she walked away from his door.

Half-way down the hill on her way to the station she remembered her name was nowhere on any of the poems or the envelope. He would have no idea who had written them, and of course none at all of how to get in touch with her. But that didn't matter. She understood now that she had written them for him, and now he had them. She would get in touch with him after he'd had time to digest what she had written, and then they would meet, two poets together at last.

She had grown tired of city life and the turmoil of London, so the next morning she took the train down to Cornwall, dreaming of high white cliffs above the slate-blue sea, of quaint fishing villages, of ancient stone circles and wild moorland ponies.

The weather was kind. She sat and wrote in the sun in the ruined castle of Tintagel, and in quayside cafes in half a dozen Cornish fishing villages. She lived each day — walking, looking, eating and writing — without thinking beyond the moment, and she was happy. When the weather turned and rain swept in from the sea, she got back on the train. She visited Exeter, Bristol, Bath and Brighton. And then one night, sitting in a pub in Brighton with a halfpint of bitter and her notebook and pen, she saw two lovers, a few feet away from her, holding hands and kissing. She felt a pang of loneliness as she

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remembered how she had loved Graham Storey, yet never met him. She was scheduled to fly back to Texas in just over a week.

The next day saw her back in Harrow. She pushed her latest poems through his letter-slot, but then, instead of retreating to a hotel in London, she hauled her duffle bag further up the hill where a pub called The King's Head had rooms for rent. She spent the rest of the day wandering around the hill, browsing in antique shops, gazing at the picturesque old buildings of Harrow School, and reading inscriptions on tombstones in the churchyard. She had dinner in the hotel restaurant, and afterwards settled herself in a quiet corner of the lounge bar, having decided to spend the rest of the evening writing.

She hadn't been there long enough to set pen to paper when Graham Storey walked in. He wore jeans, an opennecked white shirt, and a scruffy old tweed jacket going at the elbows. He looked around with a gaze as wide-open and innocently curious as a baby's and intercepted her stare. She was unable to look away. After a moment his eyes left hers and he turned to the bar. She shoved notebook and pen away in her bag. She was trembling. A few minutes later, as she had known he would, he carried his drink away from the bar, across the room, and joined her at her table.

It was an ordinary sort of pick-up, with nothing poetic about it. Probably, if she hadn't known who he was, she would have brushed him off — she had no liking for the sort of casual encounters that began in bars — but if she hadn't known who he was, she would never have stared at him in that way which encouraged, practically demanded, his attention.

When they got around to exchanging names, she did not reveal that she knew who he was. He touched her left hand very lightly. "Married?"

Her heart pounding very hard, she turned the ring on her hand so that the key was visible. "No. You?"

If he recognized the ring he gave no sign. "Never. Women never stay with me for very long. I can't blame them. I'm a selfish bastard, and my work comes before a relationship. No woman likes to feel she's second-best, not even those who seem the most sympathetic, even those originally drawn to me by the work." He hesitated, as if expecting her question, and then explained, "I'm a poet, you see, and one with a rather old-fashioned attitude toward the Muse. Oh, don't feel embarrassed because you haven't heard of me! I'm *quite* successful as a poet, but I know how little that means in this country today!"

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When closing time was called, he gave her a look shifty and shy and invited her home with him.

This was the invitation she had longed for, the answer to her dreams, yet she hesitated at the intrusion of an unwelcome memory. "Do you have a girlfriend?"

He gazed at her with unbelievably guileless eyes. "Not yet. But I'd like to." He put out his hand and caught her fingers. "What do you say?"

She said yes. They were up most of the night talking and making love. In the morning they went back to the King's Head to get her things, and she moved in with him.

It was only supposed to be for a week. But when the time came to fly home, she forfeited her ticket and let the plane go without her. Graham was overjoyed, but as soon as they had celebrated, he told her she would have to find a place of her own.

"I love you, but I can't live with you — how can I work when I'm always aware of you in the next room, and wanting to make love to you? I can't live with anyone. Poets shouldn't."

She had never told him that she was a poet, too, although she continued to write, often early in the morning while he still slept, and was producing a complete poem nearly every day. Each one she left as a love-offering on his desk. Neither of them ever spoke of this.

She believed that she would be the exception, the one woman he could live with, but obviously it would take him some time to come around to this realization. In the meantime, she was not going to be a drag on him in any way. It turned out to be surprisingly easy to tap into the blackmarket world of low-paying jobs, despite the soaring unemployment figures currently making headlines, and soon she was working as a cook-waitress at a cafe in South Harrow. She found a room to rent nearby, but spent little time in it. Now that she had a place of her own, Graham wanted her in his place as much as possible, and they spent every night together.

Two months passed, then three. She was still happy, although no longer writing. It might have been lack of time and energy — it was difficult, between her job and Graham, to ever get two consecutive hours to herself — but she felt the real reason lay deeper, that the well of creativity she had magically tapped into had run dry. Or maybe it was just the need to write which had gone. She didn't really regret it. Once she had wanted to be a great

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poet, but now she just wanted Graham to marry her. She'd be legal then, she could give up the smell of stale fat frying that always clung to her hair and clothes and get a decent job, she could give up that poky furnished room in South Harrow and live honestly with her husband, maybe they would have a baby...

One day after work as she let herself in to Graham's house she was aware of a changed,charged, atmosphere. The skin on her arms and back prickled. She thought she smelled something in the entrance hall, like a woman's perfume, but when she sniffed it was gone. She went to the kitchen to make herself a cup of tea and found the kettle still warm from recent use. Yet Graham never drank tea. The last of a pot of coffee, well-stewed by now, still simmered away on the hot-plate of his coffee-maker.

It was at that moment, sensing the recent presence of some possibly threatening stranger, that she realized the key-ring was gone.

She clutched her left hand in her right, tightly, as if she'd cut it and had to staunch the flow of blood. She couldn't remember the last time she'd noticed it, but surely it had been there this morning?

More than three months, almost more than four, now, since she'd first walked into this house, a stranger, and found the ring and put it on. She had never taken it off since, she was sure she hadn't taken it off, and it had always been a perfect fit, so how could she have lost it?

She began to search, frantically, crawling around on the kitchen floor, then rummaging through the cushions of the sofa and the easy chair in the lounge, aware even as she did so that she was more likely to have lost the ring at work. Maybe she had taken it off to wash her hands and left it beside the wash-room sink.

She didn't find it, not that day and not ever, no matter where she searched. Graham was no help. He said he hadn't noticed that she wore a ring. When, indignantly, she described it, he said yes, he remembered something like that, but he hadn't seen her wearing it for ages. He also denied that he'd had a visitor that day, gazing at her with his unbelievably guileless blue eyes, and she was afraid to insist. She had the sudden cold unwelcome thought, as he kissed her gently and told her not to worry, commented that she looked tired and perhaps should have an early night tonight, that he had fallen out of love with her.

She got up early the next morning and tried to write. It was the old, nearly forgotten struggle in the dark once again, and she knew, in the certainty of

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despair, that it would always be like this from now on, since she had lost the ring.

That evening he took her out to dinner at the Indian restaurant at the bottom of the hill. Over the nanns and the curry he told her he needed to go away for awhile, by himself. He thought he'd probably go to the Lake District, or to the Highlands of Scotland. He needed to do some walking and some thinking. The Muse hadn't been answering his call lately; he was in a rut. And while on that subject, he rather thought the two of them were in a rut as well; some of the magic had gone. A little time apart would be good for them. When he got back, they'd see how they felt. He'd give her a ring when he got back.

She clung to the fragile hope he offered, struggling to believe that when he got back all would be well, that all was not yet lost. He made love to her that night as one who performs a familiar task, his thoughts far away, yet she still tried to tell herself that it was as good between them as it had ever been.

The next morning she woke before he did, and wondered as she lay there beside him if there was any point in getting up and trying to write. She had just about decided there was not when she heard something fall through the letter-box. An image came into her mind as she heard the sound, of a large, brown envelope containing a sheaf of unsigned poems. It was hours still before the postman would come — this had to be a personal delivery, and the person who delivered it, she knew with absolute certainty, would be wearing a gold key-ring. Her name didn't matter, only her function as Graham Storey's muse.

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Nina Kiriki Hoffman has rapidly become one of F&SF*'s most popular writers. Her second solo novel,* The Silent Strength of Stones, *appeared last fall from AvoNova, and received good reviews.*

About "Key Signatures," Nina writes, "There are muscial evenings going on in garages and granges all over Oregon. You just have to know where to look."

Key Signatures

By Nina Kiriki Hoffman

AS FAR AS THE SYSTEM WAS concerned, Zita Wilson came into existence one September morning at 8:56 a.m. when she was about two and a worker found her on the welcome mat at the Social Services Offices.

At eighteen, she got out from under the system's scrutiny, but she couldn't escape the sense that she needed more than the food, shelter, and care rough and tender but never permanent that the system had given her.

Ten years and eight moves later, she arrived in Spores Ferry, Oregon.

Angus's workshop was a basement room with fiddles hanging all over the walls, and a workbench holding a bunch of blue horsehair, vice grips, and scattered mysterious tools and bits of wood. The air smelled of oil, glue, and furniture polish. Angus, a hunched old man with a disarming chipped-tooth grin and black-framed glasses, pulled a battered fiddle from the constellation on the wall and handed it to Zita, then equipped her with a bow after tightening the hairs.

Zita had sung in choral groups at some of the high schools she had gone to. She could carry a tune. She had even taken piano lessons for a year at one

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foster home, paying for a half hour lesson a week with money she got from doing extra household chores. She had had a sense that music was waiting just beyond her ability to play, and it saddened her when she had had to move on and lost her lessons and access to a piano.

Unlike the piano, the fiddle had an infinite capacity to sound horrible, the piano's capacity to sound bad being limited to how many keys she could push down at once. The fiddle sounded dreadful as soon as she touched bow to string.

Angus, who told her he had been playing sixty-two years — "Built my first fiddle from a cigar box when I was six," he said — picked up another fiddle and drew a bow across the strings, sounding a sweet, clear note. "Only difference between a fiddle and a violin is attitude," he said. "If you were playing a violin they'd tell you all these things about how to hold this and where to put that, but in my old time fiddle class I just want you to have fun. If you get a tune out of it, all the better." He grinned at her and made the bow dance across the strings. A wonderful bouncy tune jumped out, making her feet itch to jig.

She handed him a hundred dollars and became owner of the battered fiddle, a beat-up case lined with worn yellow fake fur, a bow, and a lump of rosin.

A week later, Zita went to her first class in the new community. The Old Time Fiddle by Ear class met seven to ten Thursday nights in the cafeteria of an area elementary school. Zita had walked into more than enough new situations; she didn't hesitate on the threshold, but strolled in and chose a seat in the circle of chairs set out on the institutional beige linoleum. Angus greeted her, calling her Rita, and introduced her to a man six and a half feet tall and more than sixty years old. "This is Bill," said Angus.

Bill was wearing a guitar, cowboy boots, jeans, and a western shirt with pearl snaps. He had a villain's mustache, and the portable atmosphere of a cigarette smoker. He also had flesh-colored hearing aids in each ear. He gave Zita a wide grin. "Always like to meet a nice young lady," he said.

"Bill's our accompaniment," Angus said.

Zita switched her case to her left hand and shook Bill's right.

Other people were wandering in, setting their fiddle cases on the tables and getting out instruments, tightening bows and tuning. Though this was the first meeting of the class, many seemed to know each other already. Zita

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smiled at Bill, then went over to set down her own case. She had practiced scraping the bow across the fiddle strings at home, and received angry calls from people in the upstairs apartment. She needed to find somewhere else to practice.

By the end of class she figured she had picked the wrong thing to take this time. She took different classes in each new community, searching for something she could belong to. Playing the fiddle was too hard; the weird position she had to twist into to hold the fiddle to her chin and get her hand around the fiddle's neck tired her, and she couldn't get a good sound out of the damned thing.

The next morning she got up to go to work and noticed aches and pains she had never had before. The next night, she practiced (her upstairs neighbors had gone to a movie) and finally got a real note from the fiddle.

She was hooked.

At the sixth class of the ten-week term, Bill came to her and said, "You're getting real good on that thing. You ought to come out to the grange Friday night."

She had heard people in class talking about granges—there was a grange dance every Friday, rotating between four granges monthly. She had heard, but hadn't listened. She wasn't ready to perform for anybody, even though every week in class she had to stand up and play when her turn came. It wasn't scary in class. Other people played along, helping her keep time and rhythm and, in the wildly hard tunes, notes. She felt like she knew everybody in class as well as she had known anybody in her life, and they were all friendly.

"Come on," Bill said. "Why, I'll pick you up and take you out there, bring you home whenever you say."

Her secret life began the next night.

Sitting at her window in the bank, she wondered what the other tellers would say if they knew of her secret life. Most of them went home to television and children and exhaustion; to Zita it felt odd how her present life was fragmenting within itself, her job in one fragment, her fiddle class in another, and the grange dances in a third, different sets of people in each fragment, though Bill and Angus and a few other fiddle students overlapped two.

The granges were miles out of town, and gathered dancers and musicians from their local populations; she never saw people in town that she had met

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at the granges, aside from fiddle class people. She felt like a superhero. She could put on a whole different set of clothes and assume another identity, flirting and dancing with the men, gossiping with the women, pretending she was a country girl when she had spent most of her life in metropolitan areas. They knew nothing about her, but they accepted her without question. At first she knew nothing about them. She gathered bits and snippets of information and took them home to warm her in the silence of her apartment.

On her first night she had listened to the musicians and realized none of them would ever make a record. Some of the fiddlers were talented and some were very untalented. After six three-hour classes she could play a tune as well as the worst of them, better than a few. The guitar players just played chords and kept time. An occasional bull fiddle, mandolin, harmonica, or banjo lent spice to some of the meetings, but even without them the dances went fine. Some people sang, but their voices weren't the kind you heard on the radio; syllables got swallowed, pitch varied from true, and sometimes they forgot the words.

When she shook off her competitive edge she started listening in a different way. She heard the music saying something in a language she could almost understand. It had warmth in it, an invitation. *Come. Here is home.* Her heart wanted to open, but the scar tissue was too thick.

She got books of lyrics out of the library and studied the words to the tunes she had learned on the fiddle, "Take These Chains," "You Are My Sunshine," "Have I Told You Lately that I Love You," "The Wild Side of Life," "Wildwood Flower." Most of the songs had been written thirty or forty years earlier. That made sense. Most of the musicians and dancers were upwards of fifty; one of the fiddlers was eighty-seven, another ninety-one.

Some of the other tunes had titles but no words, and those, she thought, were older, brought to this new world from over the sea, passed down through families, trailing history with them; some had probably originated in the mountains to the East. Most of the people at the granges came from out of state, Minnesota, Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee.

Travelers, like she was, ending up in Oregon, as she had. Jetsam, washed up on this particular beach.

The Thursday night after class had disbanded for the summer, Bill called Zita and asked her if she'd like to go play music in Kelly's garage. Zita had

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picked up a few tales from Kelly and Bill, though she couldn't always understand their accents or their habit of speaking almost too softly to hear. Kelly and Bill had driven taxis together in San Diego after they left the navy following World War II, and before that they had both come from Arkansas, though they hadn't known each other when they were younger, had only met after they had gone around the world. They had both moved to Spores Ferry in the late fifties, raising their children as friends, their grandchildren as mutual.

Zita had met Kelly on one of his visits to the fiddle class, and she liked him. She and Kelly sometimes made faces at each other at the granges. Kelly, whose hair was thick and white, who wore silver tips on the points of his collar and sported a turquoise bolo tie, could roll his eyes faster than anybody else Zita had ever seen.

Waiting for Bill to pick her up and take her to Kelly's, Zita took her fiddle down from the wall (one of the first things Angus told his class was, "Hang your fiddle on the wall, where you can grab it and play any old time. Don't make it hard to get to.") and thought of her lives in other places, how she had made an effort to meet people but usually ended up spending all her nonwork time in her apartment, communing with the television and all the friends there who never answered when she spoke to them. In her various foster families there had been brief sparks of warmth — a gentle haircut from one woman, a secret alphabet with a foster sister they could write coded notes to each other in, a treasured doll for her eleventh Christmas — and brief sparks of violence, shock, disillusionment. And long stretches of sadness.

She nested the fiddle in its case and looked at its battered face. "Tell you what," Angus had said when he sold the fiddle to her, "this fiddle used to belong to Jack Green. I think he got it from his granddaddy. Saw him play it many a time. After his death his widow sold it to a pawn shop, and I found it there. You take good care of it and don't leave it where the sun can get it, specially not in a locked car, hear me?"

Her fiddle had a longer history than she did.

But then, most instruments probably outlasted their players.

The door bell rang, and she closed and picked up her fiddle case. Never before had she had a date to go to someone's garage. She opened the door and smiled at Bill, and he smiled back.

Kelly's house was just another small suburban house in a neighborhood

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full of such houses. She had lived in houses like that herself. Grinning, Kelly pushed the garage door up to let Zita and Bill duck under, and inside there were six chairs arranged in a circle, and three other old men sitting with instruments on their laps.

"Hey, it's a girl," said the one in the cowboy hat and flowing white beard. His blue eyes gleamed behind his glasses.

"This here's Sid," Kelly said, pointing to the bearded man, "and that's Harve, and that's Walt. They came down from Angel Home." Kelly turned to the seated men. "This little gal's just started playing, and she's picking it up real fast."

Zita smiled at them. A foster mother's warning about being alone with men flashed through her head and vanished. Bill was one of the nicest people she had ever known, though she had been suspicious of so much kindness at first. He had been lavish with praise, and cheered her when she learned to return compliments, a skill she had to learn from him. "Hi," she said.

"Sit right down," said Kelly, gesturing at an unfolded metal chair. "Want coffee?" Its warm brown scent flavored the air. He poured a mugful for her from an industrial-sized thermos, handed it to her. Bill sat next to her. A butterfly waved wings in her chest. She had finally gotten up the nerve to play a tune at a grange dance last Friday, with Angus playing along beside her and covering up her mistakes with his own loud accuracy. The experience was amazing: people had danced, and she had played the tune they danced to. She had felt a queer sense of power that almost scared her.

There was less room here for her sound to be swallowed by someone else's. What if they expected her to be perfect?

She put a mute on the bridge of her fiddle. Even she couldn't hear herself play. After half an hour of her playing tiny tentative notes and hoping they fit the tunes the others were playing, Harve (large in overalls, and wearing a billed cap that bore the logo of a tractor rental company in Oklahoma) said, "Take that thing off. Better to make noise than silence."

"Your turn to play a tune, anyway, and you got to play it so we can hear," said Bill.

She glanced sideways at him. She wanted to try "Chinese Breakdown," but she didn't know it well enough yet. She chickened out and played "Wabash Cannonball," which was so simple she had locked it down by the third class.

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"Shaping up to be a fine fiddler," Kelly said when she had done. She smiled at him, then looked at the cracked cement floor.

Bill sang an old Hank Williams song.

"Remember the first time I heard that," said Sid. "We used to have battery-operated radios — "

Zita, picturing the big garbage-can-sized radios she had seen in thirties movies, said, "Weren't they wired to plug in?"

"Sure, you could get them that way, but we didn't have electricity in the cabin," said Sid. "After the sun went down you could pull in the Grand Ole Opry. And those big old batteries would be running out of juice and we'd scootch over closer to the radio and listen harder and the sound would fade and we'd scootch closer, and..." He cupped his ear and grinned.

Walt said, "When I went to war I was in the Navy, and they broadcast updates from the ship I was on. I didn't know about it till later, but my mama said she figured as long as those broadcasts came through I was okay."

"Hey, you wanna talk, save it for the telephone," said Kelly, and struck up a tune on his mandolin, "There's More Pretty Girls than One."

Zita played along, feeling her bow slide smoothly over the strings, not bumping and jumping and jiggling out dreadful screechy hiccuping sounds the way it had when she first started. She thought of Sid as a boy, inching closer to his radio to catch scratchy distant music, and suddenly a vision opened up inside her, a vision of a web the music made, stretching across time and space, entering the ears of a girl a hundred years ago, edging out her fingers for her children to hear eighty years ago, coming out in hums from those same children now grown fifty years ago, in the hearing of their own children and maybe the children of strangers, melting from one form into another, threads of tune catching up different beads of words, carrying them, dropping them, threading through others, transforming and traveling and yet carrying the original signatures of the first drums, the first lyres, the first flutes, the first voices.

Here was a heredity, handed out freely, gathering in sons and daughters, only asking to be learned and known and passed on. She looked at these five men, who had come from five different directions and ended up here in the garage with her, joining her in the instant family that shared tunes created.

She smiled wide at all of them, and they smiled back.

"Here's an oldie but a goodie," said Walt. "The Log Cabin Waltz."

"Teach me," said Zita.

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"Puppy Love Land" marks Howard Wornom's first published story, and the first fiction published under his own name. He has published a series of novels for TSR under the name Russ T. Howard.

Howard writes, "This is the first story I've ever written that was based on a dream: I saw a glimpse of a brown and white dog, lying on the floor, with a tuft of hair curling from its back. Then I saw an over-the-shoulder shot of a woman screaming through a screen door, 'I want her back! She's mine! You can't have her!' ... Then my dream cut to a close-up of a mask in the woman's hand. The woman was pressing it hard into the screen mesh. It was made out of dirt, and the mouth was open in a soundless scream."

Somehow Howard put all these elements together into the strong, terrifying story that follows.

Puppy Love Land

By Howard Wornom

THEIR SCHOOL PHOTOS stared up at her from the front page.

This time it wasn't anonymous. This time wasn't like averting her glance from a photocopied *MISSING* poster taped in a 7-Eleven window.

This time it was a punch in her stomach, where it hurt the most, closest to home.

Michelle Roberts, eleven years old. A slim brunette with bows in her hair.

Jennifer Sullivan, eleven. Sandy hair, a tiny scar above one eyebrow, dimples, a hint of sadness behind a thin smile.

Jacqueline Potter, twelve, the oldest and the prettiest. Strawberry blonde, a bright smile, a glimmer of womanhood shining in her hazel eyes.

And gone.

They had been gone for over a day. Jackie had gone out to play and had never come home. The other two had said goodnight and gone to bed early, and had somehow sneaked out later in the night.

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Gone.

Diana folded over the newspaper so the photos were hidden. With the air conditioner off, the car was hot and oppressive. Through the passenger window she could see the Potter home, a dented mobile home parked on cinder blocks in the middle of the Lazy Q Trailer Park, a maze of aluminum rectangles wedged along lanes of white gravel. On the driver's side of the path, a large woman in a long pink housedress watched her from the slab of concrete that was her front porch. A small gray terrier yapped at her.

Diana got out of the car and clutched her note pad. "Hi."

"Terrible thing, ain't it?" the fat lady said. "Terrible." She sipped a glass of pink lemonade, then placed it back on the TV tray at her elbow. "You're one of them reporter people, ain't ya? What's this world coming to?"

Diana shook her head. "We don't know what's happened yet." The terrier yapped at her, straining at the leash that was tied to the woman's lawn chair.

The woman watched her and shook her head knowingly. "Terrible. Just terrible."

She turned and walked around the car. The mobile home — *hell, every mobile home,* she thought — was depressingly tacky. The concrete porch was ringed with pots of dying plants, and the screen door was decorated with a faded American flag sticker that was peeling away from the metal.

She checked her watch. It was after six, and the sun was still blazing low and hot, almost an autumn orange above the trees. She felt the sweat trickling cool down her side.

A woman answered the door. She said nothing, just stared at Diana through the screen. She turned once to look at someone inside.

"We already talked to the police," she said.

"I'm not the police, Mrs. Potter. I'm a reporter for the *Daily Press.* Do you mind if we talk for a few minutes?"

The woman closed her eyes. "Naw," she said slowly. "Just don't wake up Duwayne."

The TV was on, a local news show. Duwayne lay sound asleep in a green easy chair. A glass on the lamp table was ringed with some brown liquid, and beside that was an open fifth of Old Grandad.

Mrs. Potter led her into the small kitchen and sat at the Formica table. "He don't think anything's happened. Thinks she's out messing around with some boy." She paused to light a Winston 100. The stench instantly curdled

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Diana's stomach. The ashtray was packed with butts, lined in rows along the edge. "But she ain't dating anyone. She's still a baby. He don't know her like I do."

Duwayne's snoring came over the homemade bookshelf blocking off the living room. Old stacks of *Good Housekeeping* and *People* were collecting dust on top.

"My name's Diana Bentley. I'm doing an article on the girls. Have the police said anything new to you?"

"Aw, hell, they don't know anything. They think they went off together somewhere."

"Where would they go?"

She shook her head. "Nowhere. She don't know anybody over in Hampton. Ain't nowhere for them to go."

"Your first name is..."

"Arlys. A-R-L-Y-S."

"Okay, I know the police went over this, but I'd like to get it straight for the story. When did you see Jacqueline last?"

"Right after we had supper. Right about now. It was still light out, and she said she was gonna go down and play with the girls. I started getting worried after dark. But Duwayne said to let it go, she was fine."

"Your husband was home?"

"He came home about 11:30. He'd been over to the Katt with his shipyard buddies."

Diana made a note. The Katt was a bikini bar across the James River in Newport News, about twenty minutes away. "So he'd been out since the shift ended at four?"

Arlys frowned. "Drinkin'."

The way she said it made Diana look up. Her own father had been an alcoholic, and she remembered how she had always felt when he was out somewhere, drunk and away from home.

"And you didn't call the police."

Arlys gestured toward Duwayne. "Wouldn't let me. Said she'd be back soon enough."

Diana stood and looked at a child's drawings on the refrigerator door. There were three of them, held up by fruit-shaped magnets. The drawing on top was in faded crayon, torn at a corner. It showed a basic child's house, a square topped with a triangle, and a bright sun shining over the trees. The

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second was a seascape with a dolphin jumping in the waves. The third had been drawn with colored markers, and showed a beach with three children playing in the sand. A house stood off to the right, where three puppies were dancing around a ball. A poem was written in the corner:

The doggys are playing
in the bright sunshine,
where people love them
and everythings fine.

"Are these Jackie's?"

"This one's her favorite," Mrs. Potter said, pointing to the beach scene. "Every year she picks her favorite drawing from school and puts it up here for me. It's like a little game." She took a drag on her cigarette and turned away. "She made that one a couple of weeks ago."

"School is still out for a few weeks, isn't it?"

Mrs. Potter shrugged. "She made it with the girls over at the Pines place." She turned and stabbed her cigarette into the ash tray. "Made the face there, too."

Diana looked. Below the drawings, a small mask had been taped onto the metal, painted in swirls of white and light brown. She touched it. "What is it?"

"Hell, I don't know. Papier-mâché or something. One of their projects."

"Were the three of them always together?"

"Yeah, especially this summer. And besides..." She looked over the partition at her husband. "Well, I guess she just needed to get out."

Diana looked over at him, snoring wetly in his Lay-Z-Boy.

"I remember twelve. It was a good time for me." She paused. "Mostly. Maybe not for Jackie."

Mrs. Potter glanced up into her eyes. "Maybe not."

"Where did they usually go to play?"

"Sometimes they'd ride bikes through town or down to the shopping center. They loved the library. Jackie was getting them to read all these books, like the Nancy Drews, the *Sweet Valley High* books. That's where they went a lot."

She lit another cigarette and kept the smoke in a long time. "They were spending a lot of time over at the Pines place."

"The Pines?"

"That's her name, Mrs. Pines. Don't know her first name. Runs a dog shelter off of 258. Jackie saw the sign one day we were driving home from

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Wakefield from dinner. She and the others used to go up there and help out with the dogs, two, three times a week. Had a puppy here a couple of weeks ago." She glanced over the partition again. "Duwayne said it was making a mess, so Jackie had to take it back." She flicked an ash off her polyester blouse. "Nice little thing, too. Pines woman lost her girl a few years ago, I hear. Probably don't mind having the kids around." She paused. "Jackie loved that little thing."

"Do the police know about this place?"

"Damn straight, I told them. First place I told them to look. She was always so happy to get up and out there. Sometimes she wouldn't come home till after sundown, stinking like a dog. Sundown ain't no time for no twelve-year-old girl to be out alone." She was nervous, scratching her thumbnails together. Then she got loud. "That's the only place I could think of. The only place. Where the hell else would she go? Ain't this her home? Not no damn puppy place."

Diana touched the mask with her index finger. Under the paint she could feel a light mixture of papier-mâché and something rough, like twigs. The eyes were empty, and the mouth was a tiny slit, tight, as though it were holding in a scream.

The snoring stopped suddenly, and Diana heard the springs creak in the easy chair. Then Duwayne was in the entrance to the kitchen. He glared at Diana and snatched a cigarette and the lighter from his wife. He lit up and tossed the lighter back onto the table, then grunted past her and took a Bud out of the refrigerator. She could smell him as he walked by. "When's supper? I got bowling tonight." He noticed Diana and popped the can. "You another cop?"

He was squat and beefy, all beer. His work shirt was stained with sweat, and the skin of his face was pink and splotchy, setting off his small, mean eyes. He pulled a long swig of Bud.

"I'm a reporter. I'm sorry about Jackie."

"Shit, she'll be back when that boy gets smart and throws her out. More trouble than she's worth, that one." He staggered back into the living room and poured some Old Grandad into his glass. He downed it in one gulp and polished it off with the beer. He settled back in his chair. "Getting it from somewhere else," he said.

Arlys glared at him over the bookshelf. Softly, she said, "He's a bastard sometimes."

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Diana started to speak. "Would you mind — " But she stopped herself. Diana hated getting too personal with a victim; she knew it came with the job, but sometimes she wondered if being a reporter, on her own, on the job all the time, was what she really wanted to do with her life. At times like these, when a mother's little girl might be dead, questions like these were deliberate intrusions into the lives of innocents, thrown into the public spotlight and bled for sympathy by reporters more interested in a byline than the truth.

But it was her job.

"If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to take a quick look in Jackie's room, try to get a feel for her. It would really help flesh out the story."

Arlys pushed herself out of the chair and started down the hall. "Come on."

The door to the back bedroom was open, and Diana could see heavy pine furniture, draped with Duwayne's work clothes. An empty pack of Winstons was on the nightstand. She opened a door just past a small bathroom. "This is it," Arlys said.

Sunlight came through the trees and dappled the drapes across the window. The walls were made of cheap wood paneling, and bore only a poster of Clint Black and some magazine photos of Billy Ray Cyrus and Richard Marx. The walls were fairly empty, and it instantly depressed Diana, whose walls at Jackie's age had been covered with pictures of television and movie stars, models, rock singers, and mementoes from friends and school.

She knew then that Jackie was not a happy child.

Her single bed was still made, a stuffed Mickey Mouse tucked near the pillow, and the desk held a plastic cup from Domino's, full of pencils and colorful felt-tip pens. A stack of library books was arranged near one corner, and Diana went through them: a Hardy Boys book, a paperback horror novel by Christopher Pike, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* ("Been her favorite since fourth grade," Arlys said, "read it five times."), a book on making marionettes, an anthology of ghost stories, and an Agatha Christie mystery.

"Looks like she's growing up," Diana said.

She opened the top drawer and found some sketches drawn on school paper. Puppies playing in a field. Three girls riding bikes. A little house with a ghost peeking around a tree. Tall, green trees arranged in a circle, and three girls having a picnic. The caption in red felt tip read OUR SECRET PLACE.

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She closed the drawer and sat in Jackie's chair. Top right drawer, papers and some school supplies. Middle drawer, a music box from Disney World that played "It's a Small World." Costume jewelry inside. Bottom drawer, some coloring books, old crayons, and a broken watch.

She pulled open the top right drawer again and rifled through the school papers with her thumb. Casually, she said, "Did she take anything with her?"

"Some shirts and underwear. Jeans. She took Duwayne's hunting knife, and the old pup tent she played in out back."

There. She knew she had seen something. A paperback had been hidden between the papers. Diana slowly lifted the top papers and glanced at the title, then closed the drawer.

"I appreciate you letting me do this."

"I just want my girl back."

"Is there a boy?"

"No. Not yet. Just Billy Ray Cyrus."

Duwayne yelled from the front of the trailer. "Goddamn it, Arlys, get supper on! I can't wait for that girl all night."

Diana and the mother exchanged glances. "I'll walk you to the door."

Diana stopped on the porch. The sun was lower, and Mrs. Potter's face was a pale moon through the screen.

"Sorry about him," she said softly. "He and Jackie, they haven't gotten along lately."

Diana looked around the trailer park; she didn't know why, maybe hoping for a glimpse of a girl walking home. "I'm sorry, too, Mrs. Potter." She pulled out her card. "Look, I'm very concerned about the girls. Please give me a call if you hear anything. Or if I can do anything for you. I'll let you know if I hear something."

"Thanks," Mrs. Potter said, but she wouldn't look into her eyes. "Do you think they're gonna find them?"

Diana forced herself to nod. "They'll be fine," she said. "Probably out on a Nancy Drew adventure."

Behind the screen, Mrs. Potter nodded silently.

"Mrs. Potter," she whispered, "let me ask. Why didn't you report her missing earlier?"

Arlys gestured toward her husband. "Told me not to. Said there was nothing to worry about. You know, I even stayed up waiting for her. I've

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never done that before. I fell asleep during Carson, no, whoever it was. Then it was the morning, and Duwayne had already left for work."

Diana thanked her with the promise of a follow-up and started toward her car. The door closed behind her.

The fat woman across the path called out, and Diana stared at her. "You know," the fat woman said. Her dog was facing away from her, watching something moving in the grass. It stood up and barked once, then sat back down. "You know, I once saw the face of Jesus on the side of their trailer. Harry told me it was just shadows from the trees or something. But nope, He let me see Him. He looked real sad, and I knew something terrible was gonna happen over there. Harry didn't believe me, but I just knew it."

She fanned herself with an old magazine. "She's dead, you know. All three of them. Gone way up to Jesus." She threw back her head and barked a high-pitched laugh. The dog looked at her and wagged its tail. "Better than here, though," and she pointed across to the Potter trailer. "Better than right down here."

Diana got in the car and drove away.

SHE STOPPED at the Hardee's across from the Smithfield Food Lion and swallowed two BCs with a cup of sweetened iced tea. The smoke and the tension in the Potters' sweat box had been too much, and she needed some sunlight and a little fresh air to breathe, to get the stench of Duwayne Potter out of her head. She rubbed her forehead hard with the palm of her hand. BC powder. If iced tea was truly the house wine of the South, then BC had to be the daily special.

The girls had been best friends this summer. Jackie left home about six o'clock on Wednesday. The sun didn't set until eight that night, so somebody could have seen her on the streets. Jennifer and Michelle went to bed about nine o'clock; early for them, but they both claimed they were tired.

Jackie never came home. In the morning, the front door had been found unlocked at the Sullivans', and Michelle's window screen had been taken out from the inside.

They sneaked out, Diana knew. Jackie, the oldest, left early and took care of everything they would need. She knew her parents wouldn't look for her.

It all fit. They were in it together. This was a plan. They had run away

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on the first real adventure of their lives, and they would be back as soon as they got too tired and afraid, or when the money ran out. *Unless* —

Jackie, unfortunately, she could understand. *Now.* But what could be so bad as to make the others steal away from their homes in the middle of the night, as well?

Why did they go?

She took a swallow of the syrupy iced tea and squeezed the bridge of her nose, willing the headache to go away.

The book she had found hidden in Jackie's drawer had been borrowed from the library. *Stop Child Abuse NOW!*

Unless, she realized, *something has gone horribly wrong.*

She looked at her watch. Almost seven o'clock, and the sun was still orange and bright. Still time. She drove across to the 7-Eleven and used the pay phone.

The call was answered on the fourth ring, and she could tell the woman had been crying again. "Sorry to bother you again, Mrs. Potter, but could you give me directions to that dog shelter you mentioned?"

She found the faded sign at a turn-off about three miles past Ken's Barbecue on route 258. She followed the one-lane pavement almost a mile before it became a dirt road, red with rich Virginia clay, and then she stopped at the next turn-off on the right.

The sign on the old fence was hand-painted, a child's handwriting, in colors she recognized from the mask on the Potters' refrigerator. PUPPY LOVE LAND. The flowery arrow underneath pointed down the tree-lined dirt road, peppered with shells and silver flecks of gravel. Another sign, weathered and neatly lettered by an adult, read VOLUNTEER DOG LOVERS NEEDED.

She turned down the drive. Instantly the heat in the car dropped ten degrees from the shade of the overhanging trees, and the car filled with the sweet, moist aroma of fresh magnolia. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, smiling to herself at the total difference between this country road and the Potters' claustrophobic trailer.

The drive curved to the right, and the trees opened onto a gravel-strewn circle. She slowed the car around the drive and stopped to gaze up at the house at the end. It was a huge, old Victorian: three stories tall, at least four or five

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bedrooms, a porch wrapped around three sides and a wooden swing hanging at one end.

"Wow," she said softly. "Wow."

The hot dust settled around her feet as she got out of the car. She heard dogs barking far beyond the house, where the sun blazed along the treetops, and to her left stretched a long, even field that once was a farmer's field of corn, or cotton or collards. A small scarecrow leaned helplessly at an angle way in the distance; from here she could see faded tatters of fabric hanging in the absence of a warm breeze.

"You looking for a dog?"

Diana spun around. The woman coming around the house was tall and straight, her sandy brown hair tied up inside a flourescent pink cap that read *Jantzen*. Her white shirt was damp with sweat, and the knees of her jeans were worn with green grass stains. Her hands were dark with dirt and mud.

"Hi. No, I'm with the paper." She held out her hand. "You must be Mrs.— "

"Pines." She wiped her hands on her jeans and shook Diana's hand. "Stevie Pines. Don't mind the dirt. Garden's out back."

"Diana Bentley. *Daily Press*." She handed her a business card.

"The girls?" Stevie brushed away a stray hair. "I've already talked with the police. You've talked with them, haven't you?"

"Of course. I'm just trying to follow up on their habits, you know, show where they might have gone, who they've seen recently."

Stevie slipped the card into her shirt pocket. She started up the steps leading to the front door. "Sorry I scared you. Gets quiet out here sometimes. Come on in. I'll get you something to drink. Hope you like iced tea."

"This was originally a farmhouse, built in 1888." Stevie looked up with a smile. "The year of the Ripper."

Diana turned and stared.

Stevie closed the refrigerator and handed Diana a tall glass of iced tea. "It's got a lot of history. Somehow you can feel it when you walk in. I knew it as soon as I saw the house for the first time. We had to live here."

They walked into the living room, a burnt orange from the sunlight slanting through the curtains. It was comfortable inside, the way an old house

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should be. The walls were decorated with paintings and lithographs, even some original acrylics Stevie had painted herself.

Diana was amazed how at home she felt. There were no wreaths woven out of twigs, no wooden ducks wearing scarves or gingham bows; no butter churns or cute, country signs reading ***Welcome Friends***. No wooden hearts, no blue or pink pastel hearts used as napkin holders, no handmade calendars with painted hearts as the dates, no straw wreaths made in the shape of a heart. This was a genuine country home — warm and well-kept — that eschewed the ducks and hearts and other tacky trappings of country life that suburbanites buy at craft fairs in the malls. This was reality away from the city: a peaceful life, a beautiful home, and a coexistence with the green land outside.

Diana looked over the low bookshelves along the walls, surprised at the number of books Stevie owned. The titles were a mix of literature and popular fiction — Hemingway, Proust, Stephen King — and a library of nonfiction ranging from Stephen Hawkings' *A Brief History of Time* to whole shelves devoted to topics from Arthurian literature and free speech.

"The kids did all this," Stevie said, sitting on the sofa. "It was Jackie's idea. I had them in a mess, totally out of order. Jackie arranged everything alphabetically by author, with special sections placed on individual shelves. Like the censorship books." She paused. "They loved the library."

"Why so many on censorship?"

Stevie smiled. "My mother started it. I wanted to buy *The Exorcist* when I was in junior high, and she wouldn't let me. It was a *dirty book*. So I went ahead and borrowed it from the school library.

"I loved it. It wasn't about Satanism or sex or dirty words. It was about faith — *real* faith — and innocence. How good can defeat evil. With love.

"The fanatics didn't see it that way. A few weeks later — this was when everybody thought the movie was making kids puke in the theaters — some parent got angry and complained to the school. And the book got kicked out of the school library."

She took a sip of her tea. "But *I* had read it. And after I grew up, I found a used copy of the hardback and donated it back to my junior high school library." She smiled. "It's still there.

"I guess that's why *censorship*. Because I learned early that it doesn't protect anybody; it just hurts them. It hides the truth. Because of justice."

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She grinned. "Sorry. You asked."

Diana had taken out her pen and notebook. "A minute ago, you said *we*. '*We* had to live here.'"

Stevie watched her for a moment. "This isn't part of the article."

Diana shook her head.

Stevie gestured around the room, and Diana made out framed photos standing on the tables. "My daughter. We moved here about four years ago, after my divorce. Then — " She stopped herself and leaned back into the sofa, so the shadows hid her face. "She died about six months later."

"I'm so sorry. What was her name?"

"Named after her father's grandmother. Rose."

The girl in the pictures had a wide, honest smile, and eyes so bright and open that Diana could not stop staring. Rose and her mommy, hugging and swinging in a porch swing, their faces huge in the lens. She felt she could hear them, outside in the afternoon sun, playing and laughing.

"She was beautiful." She tried to meet Stevie's gaze, but the sun was setting too fast, and her eyes were hidden in shadow. "I'm sorry. Sometimes I ask too many questions."

"A reporter with a conscience. A dying breed."

"The girls. They came here a lot?"

"At least two or three times a week, sometimes more. They loved the dogs, taking care of them. I think they just — " She stopped. "Well, I think a lot of it — they just had to get out of their homes. It was too much for girls their age."

"What do you mean?"

She leaned forward again, flicking on the lamp on the end table. "Haven't you been to see their parents yet?"

"Yes. Well," she admitted, "just Jackie's. Why?"

"So what did you think?"

"About what? I don't get you."

"Come on. How would you feel if you were a kid living in a pit like that?"

"I — "

"Their home lives weren't all that different. Economically, or emotionally. I mean, Michelle's mother is — well, she's crazy. Obsessive. Mean as hell. Jennifer's mother is shacked up with a biker over from Newport News, and they never have the time for her.

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"All the girls had were each other. And here. So I don't blame them for taking off. Not at all."

"So you think they ran away."

"I'm sure they did. I even told the police. But I don't know where they went. Or why they didn't tell me."

"Do you have any facts you can tell me about the girls' home life?"

"If you mean did I ever see anything first hand, no. But I have no reason to disbelieve what they told me. And it's a lot worse — a lot more lonely — than you or I could imagine."

She stared up at the ceiling and sighed. "Look. Michelle's mother was the model for Snow White's stepmother, okay? She blamed Michelle for her husband walking out, and she took it out on her all the time. She treated Michelle like dirt. All she really had to do was look in a mirror to see why he really left.

"Jennifer has no idea who her real father is. But she's been beaten up by some of her mother's boyfriends when they've been drunk, and her mother just gets rid of her when she wants to party with her biker friends.

"Sure, it could be a lot worse. But isn't that bad enough?"

She didn't go on. Diana said, "And Jackie?"

Stevie thought for a time. "It was worse with her."

She ran her hand through her hair and sighed. "Jackie didn't tell me everything. Just a little. But sometimes it was hard to cover up all the bruises."

"They were abusing her?"

She nodded. "Not her mother, but she let it go on. That's just as bad."

Stevie took a deep breath. "I don't know how long it's been going on, she never told me. But it's been getting steadily worse since she's been helping me the last two months. I'd see a bruise that wasn't there the day before, and she wouldn't talk very much. I think the girls knew, too. Maybe she told them everything; I don't know.

"But I think that was the catalyst: she was growing up, developing. Maybe talking back. Her daddy did something to her last week. I didn't see her for four days, and I knew he'd gotten drunk and beaten her again. When she showed up with bruises all up and down her back, I wanted to kill him. I even called child welfare and reported it, but who knows what's taking them so long to do anything."

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"He was drunk when I was there," Diana said.

Stevie raised an eyebrow. "Was he?" She shrugged. "Nothing unusual." She finished her iced tea and put down the glass. "So I guess that's why they came here so much. And why they ran away. They wanted to be loved."

"Any idea where they might have gone?"

"No. I don't think they know anybody anywhere else. If they're still around here, I'd bet Virginia Beach. Maybe Richmond. But they weren't dumb. Hampton is too close. For all we know, they might be hitchhiking to Florida. Disney World. Don't all kids want to go there?"

An image flashed in Diana's mind. Jackie's room. The music box. From *It's a Small World*.

"Disney World. Did they ever say anything about Disney World?"

Stevie sat up and thought. "Come to think of it, you know, Jackie did, I think. She loved it. She went there with an aunt and her kids a couple of years ago. You know, that's a possibility."

Diana wrote DISNEY WORLD? in her notes.

Stevie asked, "Are you going to talk to the cops again?"

"Tomorrow morning. I'll suggest Orlando to them."

"Good. That's a good idea." Stevie stood up and arched her back. "I've got to get outside and stretch. Come on. You want to look around?"

Diana put away her note pad and followed Stevie out onto the porch. The sun was low, barely a glimmer behind the treeline. The lone streetlight on Stevie's drive was already on, and the fields around her house were filled with the chirrups of crickets, the rattle of locusts.

"How did the girls help out?"

They walked around the house and Stevie pointed to a large, fenced-in area. On the back porch, she flicked a switch and the pens were flooded with light. The dogs instantly started barking, and Stevie clapped her hands and called their names.

"They fed the dogs and hosed down the pens, took them for walks in the field. Some days they'd wash and brush them, and when there wasn't much to do, they'd help out in my garden." She pointed out a line of tomato vines. "Jen planted these. Did a good job, too."

She unlocked the gate. "I'll try to keep them off you, but don't count on it."

"That's all right."

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They went in, and the dogs jumped and barked around them. A collie came up and sniffed Diana's fingers, then thrust its nose into her hand. A black cocker spaniel wriggled around in circles, waiting for attention. Stevie scratched its head and it rolled slowly over onto her feet, paws up, begging to be rubbed. "Baloo, here, is a nut. He just needs a little love, is all."

"Where did they come from?"

"All over. I found the hound dog out roaming my back woods, ticks all over him. The red one, over there, somebody abandoned over at the bait shop."

"They're great," Diana said. The collie jumped away and barked at her, then came back and licked her knee. "You've done a good job here."

In fact, it was the finest shelter Diana had ever seen. Clean, orderly, the dogs healthy and looking beautiful — she could tell Stevie really cared about these dogs. Some of the dogs even had individual dog houses, each painted in bright colors. One showed a landscape and sky, the horizon red with the setting sun, the roof painted a rich blue and lit with stars. "The girls?" Diana said.

"They built them, too. I showed them how. They were so good here."

Diana kneeled down to pet Baloo. He hopped up and licked her face. "I wish I could take one home."

"Why don't you?"

"No, I don't think so." She stood. "I've been on my own too long. I'm not ready."

Stevie looked at her and shrugged, then led her out of the pen. She locked it behind them and pointed out a shed. "Supplies and tools. The girls were in charge of that. Jackie kept it organized for me."

"So why did you start this place?"

"Somebody has to take care of them. Lost little puppies. They need food and warmth, and absolute, unconditional love. Sometimes, I think I love them too much. I don't want to let go." She looked Diana in the eyes and told her, "You need a puppy."

Diana did not answer. Stevie started back toward the house, but Diana stayed and pointed into the distance. "What's back there?"

In the distance, behind a ragged line of trees, Diana could see the dim outline of a building. "That's the old barn," Stevie said. "I don't use it much. Just for the lawn mower, really, and some planting supplies. My garage is too

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small." Stevie looked toward the horizon. "It's getting dark, but I'll show it to you if you want."

"Did the girls ever play there?"

"No, I wouldn't let them. It's old and about ready to fall down." She paused and said softly, "No. I've lost one daughter already."

They walked back to the house in silence. It was time to go, and Diana thanked Stevie for the tour and headed for her car.

Stevie stayed on the porch. "You don't think they're going to find them."

Diana stared at her, deciding how honest she should answer. "I don't know. No. I guess not. At least, not alive."

Stevie nodded silently in the darkness.

Diana looked out over the field. In the last rays of the setting sun, the tiny scarecrow was a black silhouette against a blaze of red. She said, "You know, you don't seem very upset about all this."

"I don't?" Stevie thought about it. "Maybe I don't. It's not deliberate, though. I love those girls. You don't know how I've worried about them. But now that they're gone — " She smiled gently. "Look, they didn't want to be here, not like this. Maybe it's just that, wherever they are, they're probably someplace better."

"I wish I could be sure of that." Diana opened the car door. "Thanks for the help."

Stevie waved once from the porch and watched her drive off.

Diana drove under the canopy of trees until she reached the end of the drive. She stopped the car and uncapped her pen, and at the top of her notes she wrote ABUSE? DUWAYNE POTTER? Then she thought silently for a minute and wrote ASK COPS — HOW DID ROSE DIE?

She capped the pen and drove across the James River, toward home.

SHE WOKE early, around five, her neck damp with a thin layer of sweat. Her dreams had been disjointed, chaotic; swirls of colors and shouts. She woke with a low cry that seemed to come from somewhere deep inside her. She had never before screamed during a dream.

She went in to the office early to get most of the article written for the next day's paper. The editor extended her deadline by two hours so she could interview the other parents, so she settled at her desk and first called the state police.

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She had worked with Trooper Harrison before, on the Colonial Parkway murders. Harrison was a big man, balding, who pretended to be macho and sexist around other cops. Diana knew better: Harrison was a sucker for '60s rhythym and blues, Universal monster movies and Chia pets.

"Got nothing yet, baby," he said. "Haven't turned up a damn thing."

She typed the update into her computer. "So what's going on?"

"Procedure. We've got thirty troopers and I don't know how many volunteers out searching the woods around Smithfield. We've got the dogs out and a statewide APB. We'll turn up something. Where can they go?"

She typed in *over fifty troopers and volunteers searched through the Smithfield woods* before she answered.

"How about Disney World?"

"Off to see the mouse? Possible, but slim."

"I found a music box from there in Jackie Potter's belongings. And evidence of child abuse."

She heard his chair creak, and she imagined him leaning forward at his desk. "Okay. So what are we saying here, Diana?"

She stopped typing. "I'm saying I interviewed Stevie — Stephanie Pines yesterday. The girls hung out around her place, taking care of the abandoned dogs. She says Jackie talked to her about going to Disney World. She also said that Jackie was beaten several times by her father."

"Duwayne. Yeah, we know him. Angry drunk."

"Tell me about it. Pines also said she reported the abuse a couple of weeks ago. And I found a book Jackie had borrowed from the library, on child abuse.

"I can't say for sure, but I think they all had fairly unhappy homes. And I think — I hope — they went off and escaped together."

"Shit. It's hearsay and circumstantial, but you've done your homework. Let me know when you want a job in law enforcement."

"Do me a favor, Harrison. I need confirmation on the abuse. I can't make a charge like that without facts."

"I'll see what I can do, but don't count on anything. Social Services usually plays it close to the vest."

"Understood."

"Meantime, I'll put Florida on the alert and get hold of the mounties up and down I-95. We'll get them back one way or another."

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She hung up and stared at the green computer screen. She was curiously empty, unsure what to write, and she realized that all she could see in her mind was that long field outside the Pines house, and the scarecrow, and how empty it felt to stand there alone in the twilight.

She liked Stevie Pines. She had felt an energy inside her that was strong, defiant; a casual strength forged of love and loss, tempered by survival. She wasn't sure that she could ever be that strong, on her own. Since her mother had died, Diana had tried to be decisive, a newswoman with a mission. But it was at times like this — half asleep at seven in the morning and worried for the lives of three children — that she felt helpless, alone. And ultimately useless.

You need a puppy, Stevie had said.

Her dream came back to her then, images flashing like the cursor on the screen: a flicker of candlelight; shadows wavering across a wooden wall. The laughter of children, of girls. Trees, stretching up toward the stars. A glimmer of light, whiskey brown, disappearing in a swirl. And underneath it all, a heartbeat, gradually growing into the barking of a dog.

It came to her without thinking, a certainty she desperately believed.

They're alive.

She stared at the screen. Last night, she was sure they would be found dead. And now, she thought —

No. She felt, she *knew* —

They're alive.

She wrote most of the story. Ten minutes later, she answered the phone on the first ring.

"It's Harrison. I got something for you."

"That's fast."

She started typing into the computer. "Got hold of Liz Wilkins over at Social Services. She didn't want to talk at first, but I told her what I was working on and she came through. Stevie Pines reported Potter *two* times, once last week and once three weeks ago. And somebody reported him anonymously just over two months ago. Liz thinks it was the mother."

"Wait a minute. Mrs. Potter said something to me." She tried to remember. "'Especially this summer.' She said, 'She needed to get out.' Jesus, I think this has been going on since school let out, at least. All this time, and nobody did a thing."

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"Not surprising. Damn shame, too. They were going to send a social worker out there tomorrow."

"Damn," she whispered.

"Off the record now, we're going to invite Mister Duwayne Potter over to the office for a chat. So give me a call later on. I'll let you know what the bird had to sing."

"I think they're alive, Harrison."

"I hope you're right. You know, chances are against it."

"Listen, I need something else, too."

"Okay."

"Find out for me how Stevie Pines's daughter died. About four years ago."

"Don't have to. I can tell you."

"What?"

"I was on the case."

"What case? I thought — " She wasn't sure now. "Her death wasn't natural?"

"What death? We just don't know. They never found the body."

Her fingers froze over the keyboard. "What are you saying?"

"The little girl disappeared. Rose. She was sick at home. Mom goes out to get a prescription. She gets stuck on the drawbridge, and when she gets home, the girl's gone. Front door's wide open, no signs of violence. They found the babysitter unconscious in the field.

"The girl was never found."

She had a hard time bringing it out. "This is crazy, Harrison. You don't see a connection here?"

"Sure, I thought about it at first. But, naw, not here. I was in on the case, Diana. Nothing panned out. Stevie Pines is about as right as you can get. Sure, it's a coincidence. A nasty one. But that's all it is. She's at the top of my 'A' list, along with you, babe. And Kim Basinger."

She felt hollow inside, and she realized she had been holding her breath. Stevie had told her the truth; she had reported the abuse, not once, but on two occasions. *They're alive*, she felt, *they escaped; but* this —

She said thanks and goodbye, and hung up. But she knew that there was some connection here she was not making, some clue screaming for attention that she just couldn't make out for the black and white facts. She remembered Jackie's drawing, of the house with the little ghost, and she made an

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intuitive connection that perhaps Jackie's untrained hand had never really intended.

It was Stevie Pines' house.

She saved the article and keyed off the computer, then gathered her notes and purse. *Puppy Love Land*, she thought. *What's going on out there?*

It was already 90 degrees outside when she parked in front of the Windward Way Apartments a few minutes after ten in the morning. She climbed the stairs and knocked on the door of 16B. The sticker under the door knocker read SULLIVAN.

She waited.

It was cooler in the breezeway, and she could hear the sound of tires hissing over the asphalt of route 258. She knocked again. She heard something, but she could not tell if it was someone inside or out.

The door to 15B opened behind her. A woman peered out, her hair up in green curlers and wrapped in a scarf. "They's home, but they won't answer."

"How come?"

"Don't ask me. They don't do anything when they stoned."

She went over to the woman. "They do this a lot?"

The woman looked up at her. "You a friend of theirs?"

"No. Reporter."

"Ohhh." She opened the door wider and smiled, ready to talk. "Well, listen, you ain't gonna get nothing from them. Hell, they high day and night. I don't know who's gonna take care of that kid. They sure can't when they out drinking all the time, and who knows what."

"Was the little girl, Jennifer, alone most of the time?"

"Alone? Oh, yeah. Hell, the mama go out every night. She don't have no damn time for her own child. Girl come over here every now and then and watch TV when her mama kick her out. I'm too damn old for babysitting. Hell, that woman's got men all the time over there. Damn scummy-looking men, too, them and their motorbikes. I seen them, too. Had the door open, and they just laying around the sofa, smoking that dope. Nigger music on the hi-fi. Ain't no life for a good kid like that."

"Did Jennifer tell you where she went?"

"Nope. I had to wait and hear it on the TV 'cause nobody ever come over here and tell me."

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"Any idea where she might have gone?"

She laughed, then started coughing into her hand. "Hell, you know girls. Where they gone? They gone to see boys. Where else?"

A soap opera theme came up behind her, and she started cackling. "My show's coming on. I got to go."

Diana thanked her and got her name, then went back to the Sullivan apartment. She knocked louder this time. "Ms. Sullivan," she shouted, "my name is Diana Bentley. I'm with the paper. Can I talk with you for a minute?"

She waited and pounded on the door. "Ms. Sullivan, it's about your daughter." She knocked again. "Jennifer?"

Nothing moved behind the spyhole. She placed her ear on the door. She could hear muffled laughter, the music from a game show. From under the door, she caught a whiff of marijuana.

She knocked again, and waited. A shout from building D. The locusts in the trees. She knocked again, harder, until her knuckles were red.

She took a step back and stared at the door. An F-14 from Langley roared low over the apartments, then rumbled into the distance.

"Don't you care?" she whispered. A child cried from the floor below. "Don't you even care?"

It was a faded, red brick ranch home from the sixties, surrounded by azalea bushes and low hedges that were uneven with neglect. The well out front was a red brick square, covered with a concrete slab where a concrete squirrel sat, gnawing a concrete nut.

The old lady squinted at her through the screen door. She was short, her gray hair scraggly and uncombed. A thin brown cigarette dangled from the corner of her mouth.

"I'm with the paper, Mrs. Roberts. I'm doing an article on the girls for tomorrow's paper."

"I can't let you come in. The place is a mess."

She looked beyond her into the house. Newspapers were in neat piles arranged alongside the sofa. The coffee table and furniture were almost hidden by tall stacks of papers and magazines, and grocery bags full of Pepsi bottles. There was one clear spot on the sofa where the old lady had burrowed out a space for herself to watch television, surrounded by bottles of pills and newspapers that had been folded over to the crosswords.

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She felt a headache starting to throb behind her eyes. "That's all right. This is fine."

"Have you heard something about Michelle?"

"No, not today. I'm sure the police are looking — "

"They're not doing a goddamn thing. Not telling me one damn thing about my own daughter. You know where she is?"

"Well, no, ma'am."

"She should be right here, goddamn it. Right here with me, right where she belongs. Not off running away with that goddamn white trash."

Diana stood silent, almost frozen. Mrs. Roberts was shaking her head, jabbing her cigarette like a pointer. "I told her over and over those friends of hers weren't any good. And you think she listened to me? Hell, no. Just like her goddamn no good father."

She disappeared into the living room, complaining to herself. Diana squeezed her eyes shut and wished this was all over. The acrid smoke from the old lady's cigarette seemed to billow through the screen in the old lady's wake. Mrs. Roberts rummaged through the mess on the coffee table. "I had it right here." She picked up a pile of bills and placed them in her spot on the sofa. She moved another pile to the floor. "Goddamn it, somebody's stolen it."

"Can I help you with anything, Mrs. — "

The old lady looked up and shook her finger at her. "Don't you come in! Just you stay right there." She moved another stack on top of the pile on the floor. It spilled over. She got down on her knees and fished under the sofa for a stray envelope. "Shit," she muttered. "Somebody's been messing in my goddamn papers."

She stood up and looked over the piles left on the table, then smacked her lips. "Here. Here." She started toward the door. "She ran out, just like her father. Goddamn Roberts are all alike, not like *my* family. Can't trust one of them. Not even my own daughter. And goddamn it, I want her back."

She pressed a mask into the screen, almost identical to the mask Jackie Potter had made and taped to her mother's refrigerator. The screen stretched out, imprinting a grey face into the wire mesh.

"Look, she made me this," Mrs. Roberts said in the darkness behind the mask, behind the screen. "And she's mine, damn it! She's *my* daughter. *Mine.* And I want her back, goddamn it. *She's mine! I want my daughter back!*"

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Diana could feel the sun shining hot on her shoulders, and she suddenly felt too close to this woman, too trapped. She apologized for upsetting her and stumbled off the front stoop, unnerved by the obsessions concealed in the darkness behind the screen; and in the car, while old lady Roberts frowned at her through the screen door, still shaking the mask in one hand, Diana leaned back against the hot vinyl seat and took a deep breath in the still air.

Now I know.

Now I know why.

THE STORY was finished, logged in and ready for the morning edition, and it was after six P.M. when she let herself into her townhouse and locked the deadbolt behind her. The day had seemed too long and too ugly, mostly because she couldn't get the smell, and the image, of that woman out of her mind.

She threw her purse on the sofa and went straight for the refrigerator. She filled two-thirds of a glass with ice and tonic water, then took a green bottle of Tanqueray from the pantry and filled the glass to the top. She stirred the drink with her finger. "Screw the lime," she said, and she took a long drink.

The air conditioner had been set on 75°, but the sunlight streaming through the blinds had kept the air conditioner pumping all day, and the temperature was up to 81°.

She closed the blinds and picked out a Jimmy Buffett CD. She turned the volume low, a pleasant undercurrent that would stay with her without being intrusive. It was a Key West day, she thought, sipping her drink: a day that cried out for her to be lying out by the hotel pool on Key West, doing absolutely nothing; being served lime margaritas while her skin turned brown and the Gulf breeze brought the scent of distant shores and mythic adventures; then dancing and drinking long after the sunset celebration at Mallory Square, usually over at Sloppy Joe's or upstairs at Rick's, or even in Capt. Tony's.

"Pascagoula Run" came on, and Buffett sang about a kid leaving home to experience the wild world. Last summer she had taken the bartender's stapler and fixed her business card to a wooden beam at Capt. Tony's, on top of a card from some Pennsylvania attorney. The bar had been wallpapered with yellowed business cards and dented license plates, and she had been proud of herself, her first vacation after her first year of reporting; she had left

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her mark where drunks and tourists and middle management peons alike could see her name and what she did. *Reporter.*

Reporter. *Right.*

She had felt good about herself then, about her career and her choices, and she had wanted to do something she had never done before. It had been her only visit to Key West, but returning was a frequent dream whenever the deadlines built up at work, or when she just needed desperately to be somewhere exotic, absolutely peaceful, surrounded by happy people, totally different, more alive than anywhere else.

Especially here. Especially now.

The Tanq and tonic smelled fresh and clean, but under it she could still taste old lady Roberts's foul cigarettes. She took a sip of her drink and let it slide cold down her throat. Now, there's a word. Foul. Yes, that woman and all the hatreds she hoarded over, as though they were family photos to be displayed like a priceless collection of miseries, would stay in her mind for a long time. *Foul.*

She peeled off her damp clothes and let them stay in a heap on the floor. She lay on the sofa, sipped her drink, and crossed her arm over her eyes.

She had finished the story just before one. She had taken a long, quiet lunch of curry chicken and fried rice at Kam Ling's, then returned to the office, waiting for news from the cops.

Harrison had called around three. Troopers at the rest stop just inside the Florida border had stopped three girls matching the APB.

Diana had listened quietly and had asked all the right questions, but she had known inside that it was all wrong.

She had been right. It turned out the girls had been with a church group from North Carolina, heading for a choir festival in Daytona Beach. The troopers had held back the church bus for over an hour, and calls had gone back and forth between cops and parents until the situation was finally straight.

Duwayne Potter had been brought in for questioning. They had found him on the job, already half drunk, and they were checking his alibis as they spoke.

So far, nothing.

Harrison had said, "Sorry, babe. I'll call you if we find something," and she had thanked him and hung up. *Forget Florida,* she had thought. *Something else is going on. You're not going to find them.*

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Not there.

She sat up on her couch and held the cold glass against her forehead. Running away *fit*. It was the only thing she wanted to believe. It had been worse for them than she ever could have imagined, and it looked like they had finally had enough and had run off to see the world.

It's a good story. Maybe they crossed a wild meridian of their own, and they're off on a fairy-tale adventure more real than their own lives in the sticks. "God, I hope so," she said out loud. "I hope so."

But it was more than that, and she knew it. She could feel it with every instinct, with every electrical impluse playing along her cerebral synapses.

And the reason was Stevie Pines.

She had lied to her. *No*, she realized, *not lied, but —*

Damn it, she had to face it. Stevie Pines's only real crime was not revealing her own daughter's disappearance. She felt betrayed by the lack of confidence, and by her own reaction at hearing of Rose's disappearance. It was all too much of a coincidence; and she had started *liking* her, damn it, liking her too much for these ugly suspicions.

But she had noticed something else. Stevie had talked about the girls in the past tense. And it was also her nonchalance at their running away. As though she knew something that no one else would ever know.

Like, where they were.

Like, where her daughter was.

And if, maybe, they were all together.

Alive.

She finished her drink and said the word out loud, softly. "Alive."

And she didn't like it at all, because now she wasn't sure at all if they would ever find them. Alive or dead. And she didn't know why.

But she was sure that Stevie Pines did.

Did she help them run away? Did she hide them? Are they still there, like those puppies, being fed and cared for by someone who loves them?

And if *they* are, then where is her own daughter?

She nodded to herself. The girls deserved better than what they had always had, and she was determined to finish this and find them.

And if you find them, you really want to bring them back? To the smoke and the trailers and the drugs? To abuse...and to madness?

No. Of course not. But she desperately wanted this story to have as

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happy an ending as possible, an ending where the little lost princesses are brought back from the deep woods.

And, unfortunately, where reality demands that they deal with their own wicked queens; maybe through therapy, maybe through social workers.

"Damn it." *What a trade off. This fairy tale is more like a tragedy.*

She unscrewed the cap off the Tanqueray, added some ice and fixed another drink. This one was stronger; she could feel it tingle on her tongue, and she drank half of it in one long gulp.

"I'm going to need this," she said, and she polished off the drink. "For tonight, I'm going to need it."

At first she tried to imagine what private investigators would do in the hardboiled novels she read. Should I carry a gun? *You don't have one.* Should I confront her directly? *You don't have a shred of evidence.* Call the cops?

Hell, no. This one is all yours.

Damn it, what would Spenser do? But the gin had gotten to her, and dimly she realized that she was no Spenser or Stoner or Elvis Cole, and she finally decided just to be careful and quiet, and try not to attract attention.

She did have one answer, though.

If she's got them, where would they be?

Only one place out there where she didn't show you around. Inside that old barn.

Her buzz had evaporated hours ago. Her watch showed 3:17 — *the soul's midnight*, she remembered from a Bradbury book — and she parked her car on the last stretch of asphalt and cut the engine. In the beam of headlights, moths flittered toward her, and she turned off the lights.

The night was clear and bright, and with the full moon high above the tree line, she could see the turn-off toward the house about a hundred yards away. She got out and softly closed the door. The light inside did not go out, so she pressed against the door until it clicked. The light winked out. She was alone in the road. All she could hear was the ticking of her car, the calls of crickets.

She wore a black T-shirt from an Aerosmith concert and black Levi's and an old pair of sneakers, and she started onto the dirt road, peering through the trees and foliage for a glimpse of the Pines house. The rocks crunched loud under her feet. She held a black, halogen flashlight in her right hand: a heavy thing, filled with five D batteries, that could double as a weapon. She was ready.

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She paused beside the child's hand-written sign and wondered which one of them had painted it. Then she looked around one last time, back down the long road frosted with moonlight, and down the canopied drive toward the house.

She took a deep breath. *This is it.* And she started in.

The moon shone through the trees in pale patches. It was hard for her to see, but she had no desire to use her flashlight this close to the house and let Stevie know that someone was coming. She focused on the opening of silver moonlight at the end of the drive and kept on, staying close to the right-hand fence.

At the end, she kneeled down below the fence and peeked between the trees. The house seemed pure white in a bath of moonlight: closed tight and dark inside, asleep. To the left lay the long field surrounded by trees; straight ahead, the dog pens, and the old barn hidden in the woods.

No. A straight path was too close to the house. Anyone sneaking near the dogs would be guaranteed to wake them up, barking. Her only chance was to make her way through the trees, cross the field, then stay well behind the house and sneak into the barn.

She stepped back into the darkness under the trees and climbed over the fence, then made her way through the brush so she could travel the length of the field hidden just inside the trees. The tree line was straight, but the going was slow. Several times she stumbled over roots or fallen branches, and once she stopped at the sound of something in the woods with her. She caught a faint whiff of skunk, then realized there was probably a fox burrowed somewhere near; their smells were nearly identical.

The moon was higher now, and would not afford her any real cover out in the field. She was just past the halfway point: she was almost in line with the scarecrow in the center, tilting as though it were ready to fall over. It was after four o'clock; she could stay inside the tree line and follow the field along its borders, but she was already bruised and scraped and tired, and she might not make it to the barn until five, and that was cutting it too close to dawn. The house was still dark in the distance, and she hoped that if she stayed low enough, she could make it across the field and no one could possibly see her.

She left the trees and started through the tall grass, hunched over, keeping in line with the scarecrow. She stopped once at the sound of wings overhead, an owl, and realized that in the morning, her path through the field

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would be plainly visible. *I could hang around and make crop circles*, she thought. But she would be gone by the time Stevie noticed the trail, and anyway, she would probably blame it on some kids.

The scarecrow stood a head taller than she had expected, and seemed more ancient and fragile up close. The clothes on the scarecrow were faded and delicate, fluttering in a breeze from the west, and she touched the post as she gathered her breath. It was surprisingly solid, smooth and warm under her fingers. She felt the strength of the wood, and she wondered what it was that made Stevie so strong, to live out here without anyone else.

She left the scarecrow behind and started for the distant line of trees ahead. She was parallel to the dog pens, and she crouched lower in the grass, hoping that the dogs were all asleep in their shelters. The treeline in the back was uneven, covered with kudzu and ivy, creating a curtain of rounded shapes that flowed with shadows, a forest created by thought.

Then a dog barked: a loud, lonely bark, not of warning, but for attention. She dropped to the ground and peeked through the grass. A black labrador was pacing the wire fence. It stopped and barked once toward the house, then turned and disappeared into one of the doghouses.

Her back was a tight knot of pain when she finally reached the treeline in the back. The trees there were closer together, forming a ragged line from the far end of the field and beyond the house. The woods were darker, quieter, and the tunnel back to her car seemed an impossible distance away. She checked her watch. It had taken her almost twenty minutes to cross the field. A lot of time left, but she had still wasted more time in the trees than she had planned.

She stayed in the trees and headed toward where she thought the barn lay. She had to squeeze through trees and make her way over limbs and trunks that had fallen, and she turned on her flashlight for seconds at a time to make sure of her footing. There were no sounds in here, of birds or locusts, and she stopped when the silence seemed to crash around her all at once. She flicked on the flashlight and played it among the trees and ivy that surrounded her like a cage.

And she knew that she was lost.

Her flashlight found a gap between two huge trees that was barren of weeds and brush, and she squeezed through and followed a curving path of grass and leaves through the woods, looking up occasionally, hoping to spot the rusted roof of the barn through the branches.

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She came out of the woods into a circle of bright moonlight and stared up at the tall trees silhouetted against the pale night sky. In the center of the clearing, she found a yellow tennis ball that someone had forgotten in the tall grass.

She tossed it up and caught it, then looked around. There was something here. She played her flashlight across the trees, and on the eighth tree found a ribbon tied around the trunk. At the base of the tree, tucked between the roots, a plastic Garfield school box had been covered over with leaves.

She got down on her knees. Inside were a plastic ring and seven pennies, and a folded sheet of paper. The girls had drawn on it with crayons: a map of the property, the trees inhabited with an owl and a ghost, and, according to this, they had buried their treasure inside the old barn.

She sighed at her own stupidity, recognizing the clearing for what it was: the girls' secret place.

And she wondered if Stevie knew that the girls did indeed play inside the barn.

The dew was cool, soaking through the knees of her pants. The map showed a path, a secret trail to the barn, and she stood and lifted an overhang of ivy between two trees and stepped onto a narrow path beaten out by the girls' feet.

The path led to a clearing in front of the barn, thick with tall, pale grass and concealed from the house by the treeline. A rich smell hovered over the clearing, of earth, a dank ripeness. The moonlight glittered on the jagged shards that were left alone in the barn's windows. The tin roof was rusted, red, sagging inward where timbers had rotted and walls had crumbled away. The old wood walls were speckled with mildew, swallowed by spidery tendrils of ivy that reached up onto the roof. The doors hung open, letting on to a darkness unfiltered by the bright moonlight.

She snapped on her flashlight and tucked the map into a back pocket. She stared long at the darkness beyond the door. She whispered, "Here we go."

She squeezed between the doors, careful not to make the rusted hinges squeal and possibly set off the dogs. The dry smell of dust, of old hay, was strong, permeating the wood. Her flashlight picked out a rusted handsaw hanging from a support pole, a couple of dented milk cans. A mouse rustled in one of the stalls. Webs swung in the high, dark corners in the rafters above.

In the last stall on the left she found Stevie's riding mower, a shelf of 10W30 oil and a funnel, and several three-gallon containers of gas. On the

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other side were a large toolbox, about twenty two-by-fours, a jar of nails and a couple of hundred-pound bags of dry dog food.

She played the flashlight into the rafters. An old ladder led up to a hay loft, and she grasped the rail and tested all of her weight on the bottom rung. It held.

She tested each rung first, and slowly made her way to the loft. The hay doors were latched shut, and the floor was strewn with a light layer of brittle hay that had lain undisturbed for years.

She sat on the edge and let her feet dangle in the air.

Nothing. It was just like Stevie had said: supplies and tools.

She climbed back down and went again through the barn. She looked behind the bags of dog food and aimed her light into all the corners. She rummaged through the toolbox and looked under the lawn mower, but she found nothing.

Beyond the stall, the rear doors were locked, and ivy had crept in from outside. An old milk can stood in a far corner, near a line of old hoes and rakes leaning against the wall. The smell was different in this corner, underlaid with the scents of grease and smoke.

She aimed her light through the tools and behind the can. Nothing. But the milk can was different, shinier than the others in the barn. She reached for it with one hand and shook it. Something wobbled inside.

She twisted off the cap. Inside was a blue tin box, a picture of Mickey and Minnie Mouse printed on top and scenes from the Magic Kingdom on the sides. A label underneath said it had been filled with candy.

She smiled — *This must have been Jackie's* — and she popped it open with her thumb.

Their treasures were simple and beautiful, a glimpse into girlhood. Fifty seven cents. A pewter key chain. Folded notes kept over from school: *I think Darin likes you!!! and Let's meet at my house at 4:00.* A stack of scratch-off lottery tickets, all losers, bound with a green rubber band. Three smooth rocks and a chunk of quartz that flickered like a diamond in the beam of the flashlight. Long ribbons, identical to the one tied outside on the tree. Three lockets, one for each, with plastic jewels inside. A photo of the girls standing in the kennel with Stevie Pines. And a cassette tape, the uncensored 2 Live Crew.

She envied the wondrous dreams of escape and adventure, of growing up, these things must have created for them. She hefted the quartz. She, too, had had a lucky rock, that she had thought was magic. She had kept it in an old

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Roi-Tan cigar box along with other small, lovely things, and had wished upon it when her Daddy was out drunk, or angry, and he had his work belt dangling in his huge hand.

She wondered if the girls' rock had brought them all the magic they had needed to get out. She hoped so; for hers, in the end, had been just a rock after all, and her escape had come only years later, when she was old enough to move out and leave the hurt and the arguments behind.

We're all runaways, she thought, and she placed the quartz inside the tin box and closed it tight.

The clamp of tin echoed softly in the rafters. She heard another sound, outside. A spongy sound, of grass, of twigs crackling under feet.

She clicked off the flashlight and hugged the box to her chest. She backed against the wall and felt hard wood dig into her back.

The sound came again, louder. A soft, organic sound that she could feel in her feet, as though something were worming quietly through the earth, spreading its fingers up through the grass.

She flattened herself into the shadows and felt the wood jab into her back. She reached around and felt a wooden handle, a rusted latch. *Yes.* She covered the lens of the flashlight with one hand and let a soft beam angle between her fingers. It was a door, heavier, stronger than the walls around it. She cut the light and pressed the latch. A soft click; then the door swung open on silent hinges, and she slipped inside.

The smell overwhelmed her, the aromas of grease and wood smoke, and old salt, absorbed into the walls. This had been the farm's smokehouse, where hams and bacon had been cured, hanging from planks and beams along the walls. The tin roof had fallen in, probably years ago, and the debris had been cleared away to leave a space in the center of the room.

She stepped forward, the flashlight unnecessary in the brilliant moonlight streaming down through the roof. She stared at the ragged circle of light cast upon the floor, and her stomach suddenly clenched into a tight fist.

Circles had been etched into the packed, earthen floor. Circles meeting, conjoining; circles within circles, dizzying, forming endless patterns and focal points that trapped her eyes, spun her around, made her want to dive inside and be lost.

She felt separate, outside herself, as she was jerked helplessly toward the spirals. The deep, ripe smells of earth and smoke filled her nose. Her stomach

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heaved. She tasted the gin and tonics in the back of her throat and she fell to her knees. Her head felt thick, buzzing; she thought she could feel the cold, pure energy of the moonlight streaming down upon the infinite spirals, charging them with power.

She felt cold, awash with the moonlit energies sparkling around her, as though invisible fingers were caressing her, raising goosebumps along her skin. She chanced a quick glance at the patterns and felt momentarily dizzy, but at this angle near the floor, the circles were distorted, ovals, and she felt only minor discomfort.

Three circles were drawn within one large circle, each containing, meeting, smaller circles that whorled within each other like stars spiraling within galaxies. In three tiny circles, conjoining precisely at the center of the huge pattern, lay three locks of hair, knotted together. And in the larger circles, three small bundles of mud and twigs and fabric, no larger than melons, had been carefully positioned, absorbing the moonlight.

There was something inside each, wrapped in placentas of wet earth. She fought down the vertigo as she stood to get a better look at the bundle closest to her. It was slightly open at the top, where the mud-caked fabric had dried and come apart, and in the moonlight she caught a glimpse of white and brown, and two eyes of darkness.

She recognized the little face.

A mask.

A life mask, she thought, and she reached inside.

The hand that clenched the back of her neck was strong, a grip like corded steel. She yelped once and was jerked up onto her feet, then thrown back through the open door. The metal fingers of the rakes scraped her ankle as she fell. She tasted dirt on her tongue, then wiped it away with the back of her hand as the door slammed above her. The flashlight snapped on and picked out the girls' tin box, upside down in the dirt. She winced as the beam focused on her face.

"You could have ruined everything," Stevie Pines said. She grabbed Diana's arm and jerked her off the floor. She slammed her against the wall, shining the light into her eyes. "If you've done anything at all..."

Diana slapped the flashlight away from her face. "You *wanted* me to buy that story of yours. They didn't run away to Disney World, and you know it."

Stevie shook her head and sighed. She snapped off the flashlight. "You

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don't know a thing," she said. "You shouldn't have come."

Diana stepped away from her, toward the barn doors. "Look, I don't know what you're doing here, but I know you did something with them." She moved closer to the opening. "That was their hair in there, wasn't it? In those damn circles. You've got them somewhere." Her voice rose. "You can't just go around, stealing peoples' daughters." She paused. "Good God — " She realized what she was leading up to. "What did you do with your own?"

She was at the open doors now, backing out. She could see the moonlight spilling over her shoulders.

Quietly, Stevie said, "I never did anything to Rose. I'd never do anything to hurt her. Or the girls." Then she stood up straight and gazed beyond Diana, into the night. "And I suggest you stay right where you are."

She felt a breeze, like a warm, sweet breath, against her skin. She glanced quickly over her shoulder, then looked again, and turned, her eyes widening. She backed into the barn, staring through the doorway.

"What *is* th— "

"I never expected this, Diana. You — There has to be a reason. Nobody could ever make it this far."

The moonlight bathed the clearing in a pale, ghostly light. The tall grass waving in the breeze seemed frantic, whispering, like the legs of a dying insect.

And in the center of the clearing waited the scarecrow.

Its ragged clothes flapped in the warm night wind. The moonlight spilled over its features, casting crevasses of shadow in the wood of its hands and legs. It was not a sewn-up suit filled with hay, but a figure woven, or *grown*, of vines and wood, fingers of twigs; hair of ivy and corn silk, imitating a living shape, a human, crucified —

Or a small child.

The breeze fluttered the scarecrow's white bonnet, the edge of its tattered dress. Its eyes were wide and empty, and the indentation of its gaping mouth was a wide shadow. She felt hands grasping her arms, and Stevie spun her around and stared into her eyes. The grass whispered with the sound of burrowing worms, of secrets buried in the earth.

"Listen to me. It is very important that you listen to me."

"She's — "

"Diana, you have to listen."

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She tried to look back, but Stevie held her arms tighter. "Diana, you have to go. I promise you, you'll know everything. Okay? I think you pretty much know already. But you have to go. You don't belong here. And they're looking for you."

Diana stared at her, finally realizing what she was saying. "Who? Who's looking for me?"

"The police. Out by the plant."

"What are you talking about?"

Stevie shook her head. "You'll have to trust me." She looked once out through the doorway. "Come on."

She almost screamed. "Out there? It's — "

Stevie shoved her from behind. She stumbled out and spun around.

But the scarecrow was gone. Or had never been there. The grass murmured softly in the breeze. "Just be thankful you didn't use this in there." Stevie handed her the flashlight and started toward a faint path in the trees, leading straight to the house. "You don't know what you could have done."

Diana flicked on the light and shined it across the clearing, picking out moths bobbing above the grass. The scarecrow was gone.

She started for the trees, and her foot thumped against something hidden in the grass. A gourd lay wrapped in a cradle of leaves, shining purplish in her light. She aimed the flashlight around. The gourds grew throughout the little field, protected by clumps of grass and swaddled in leaves veined with red. She parted the leaves of one with her foot, and her nose filled with the gourd's rich, ripe odor. It twitched, pulsing as though something were pushing out, toward the light. Toward her.

She backed off. Stevie yelled, "Let's go!"

She snapped off the light and found Stevie's silhoutte against the far opening of the path. She plunged through the trees and caught up with her in the field, halfway to the dog pens. The long field shone in the moonlight. The house loomed huge and white in the distance. "Wait a minute," she said. She slowed and picked out the silhouette of the scarecrow, in its place far in the center of the field. "What is it? What's going on out here?"

Stevie kept walking. Diana picked up her pace. "Why won't you talk to me?"

They walked in silence then, until they reached the pens. Diana froze. All the dogs sat lined up at the fence, watching her. A large black dog jumped to the roof of a dog house and stared. Not one barked; not one panted or scratched or moved. They watched her.

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She kept her eyes on them as she ran for Stevie. The dogs all stared toward the scarecrow in the field. "Wait up!"

Stevie watched her from the front steps as she ran up. She stood and turned to face her from the porch.

"You know where they are," Diana said.

Stevie looked down at her. "Go home. Call the cops."

"Why? What's happening here? *Tell me why.*"

"Look. There are things you don't know. But I think you will, soon. I think that's why..." She trailed off and stepped down, stopping close to Diana.

"No. Now, I—" Stevie stepped back into the shadows of the porch and faced the field. "God, Diana, I'm sorry. I can see it in your eyes. I didn't know. I had no idea. Now I understand — why you care about them so much."

Diana felt the heat rise in her cheeks. "This isn't about me."

Stevie opened the door. "This is the way they wanted it. You'll understand soon. They're where they need to be." The screen door closed, and Stevie latched it. "Go, Diana. Do it now. Trust me." She closed the door behind her. Diana heard the deadbolt slide back. The porch light winked off.

She stared into the shadows for a moment, then she screamed at the door, *"What! What do you know!"*

Ten minutes later, she stopped at a pay phone at a bait shop and climbed out of her car. She hesitated, the phone at her ear, her eyes rimmed red. *This isn't about me!* She dropped a quarter in the slot and made the call.

A state trooper answered on the first ring. "Harrison's been trying to reach you, miss," the trooper said. She heard papers rustle near the phone. "He said for you to meet him across from the packing plant. He said you'd know what it was all about."

She suddenly went cold inside. The phone was forgotten in her hand. *I'll call you,* Harrison had told her, *if we find something.*

THE RED and blue lights flickered like heat lightning against the horizon. She turned onto the packing road. A young trooper had angled his cruiser across the road, and he stopped her several hundred yards away from the crime scene. She mentioned Harrison and showed her reporter's I.D., and he waved her on. She pulled up in a tangle of sheriff's cars and state cruisers, their radios

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belching static, their staccato flashers stabbing her eyes.

She asked a deputy for Harrison, and he pointed toward a knot of trees about fifty yards away in a field. It was over an hour before sunrise, and yesterday's heat still had not broken. Her clothes were damp and stuck to her skin, and it was hard to breathe in the humid air.

She stopped in the field to watch a group of cub scouts, standing around in the glaring red lights. Tents had been arranged in a half-circle behind them. Some of the scouts were crying, responding to a trooper who was kneeling in the grass, talking with them.

Harrison saw her from the trees and shouted. She hurried past a lone cruiser, where a trooper sat in the back, brushing something on top of a briefcase. She glanced once, then went to Harrison.

The cops had set up portable lights, all angled toward the ground. Harrison gestured for her. She stepped to his side and looked down once, then clenched her eyes shut. "Oh, damn," she said. Her words were empty against the too real backdrop of tinny voices from the road. She wanted to cry, but all she felt was emptiness inside. She turned away. "Damn. Oh, damn."

The girls had been laid out side by side, wrapped loosely inside a light green tarp and buried under a blanket of twigs and dirt and leaves. They had been stripped naked, their flesh pale in the harsh, artificial lights, and their throats had been slit, long straight gashes of blood and shadow beneath their chins. The blood was black underneath their bodies. A few flies danced across their gray flesh.

A photographer kneeled to take close-ups of the bodies. She could see the flashes behind her eyes.

"I'd say they've been dead at least a day," Harrison said, "probably more like three." He wiped under his nose with his hand. "Called Dr. Bragg from Hampton. He should be here soon to look them over. But we won't find out much till the official autopsy in Norfolk."

She turned and forced herself to look. The sweet smell of decay in the heat nauseated her, and she covered her nose with her hand. "Rape?" she said.

"Don't know. I'd expect it."

A flash went off.

"Couple of cub scouts found them. Had to come out and pee." He looked toward the tents. "We got out here about an hour ago."

"Find anything?"

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"The weapon had been buried with them. Pretty stupid. We're printing the handle right now."

She turned to watch the cop in the back of the cruiser, dusting a long knife with black powder. *They can't be dead. They can't.*

"A knife?"

Harrison nodded.

"A hunting knife?"

"Yeah."

Her stomach twisted. She thought of the circles scratched in the dirt. "Oh, God. That's Jackie's tent, isn't it?"

Harrison knelt and looked closely at the fabric under the bodies. "It is a pup tent."

"And that's the hunting knife Jackie stole from her father."

Harrison watched her. Over his shoulder, he yelled, "Harvey! What have you got?"

Trooper Harvey stepped out of the cruiser and slipped the knife into a plastic bag. "Oh, we got prints all right. All over it. This is the weapon, for sure."

"The kids stole that knife. You make their prints?"

Harvey shook his head. "All too big and well-formed. I'd say an adult male, like the others."

Harrison was quiet for a moment. Diana said, "Others? What does he mean? Not other bodies."

He shook his head and led her toward the cruiser. "No. Prints. We found something else." He reached through the window and pulled out another plastic bag. He held it up into the light.

She couldn't breathe. She felt cut off, alone and cold, as though the world had stopped around her. The bright, flashing lights seemed muted and still. The only sound she could hear was the slow beating of her own heart, and her head swam with the ripe scent of earth.

"They didn't steal the knife," she said. Harrison watched her. Her eyes were blank. The words came out, but she was not sure if she meant them. She just did not know anymore. "They didn't steal the tent or anything else. They didn't run away."

Harrison looked at the bag, then looked back at her. "So what is it, Diana?"

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"It's him. He did it. He killed them."

"Who, Diana?"

She stared at the bag.

At the empty glass bottle.

At the butt of a dead Winston cigarette, stuck in a syrupy film of Old Grandad.

And at the image of a scarecrow, a sad little guardian, alone in a garden of blue.

The events came fast, hazy images, like the popping of flashbulbs.

Near dawn, the Lazy Q Trailer park was surrounded by representatives of the combined police forces of Smithfield, Isle of Wight County and the Commonwealth of Virginia. Flashing cruisers blocked both entrances to the trailer park, and officers had taken cover at points surrounding the trailer.

Diana stood safely with Harrison behind an unmarked car, angled nearby so he could supervise. She had told him everything she knew and suspected about Duwayne Potter, but she could not bring herself to mention the events of the night with Stevie Pines. They were too weird, too disjointed. It was their secret, she felt, and there were too many unanswered questions that were better left to her.

At 5:53 A.M., Harrison ordered two troopers to make the arrest. Diana held her arms tightly as the cops pounded on the door and announced themselves, pistols ready. There was no answer. They shouted again. Lights snapped on inside the trailer nearest Diana, and a face peeked out, a fat lady with pink curlers in her hair. Diana heard the yapping of a small dog. She recognized the woman, and through the glass, heard her say, "I knew it. I knew it. That S.O.B. did it like I said!"

A sleepy yell came from the trailer across the drive. "Huh? What is it?"

"This is the police, sir! We have a warrant for your arrest! Open the door and raise your arms above your head!"

"What?" He was waking up. "No. No! I'll be right there!"

Harrison spoke into the microphone in his hand. "Stand ready." The cops leveled their guns at the trailer door.

In the hazy stillness, Diana could hear the crickets and the locusts waking to the dawn. She heard a door unlock, the squeal of hinges. The trailer door swung open.

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It happened faster than she had imagined. Harrison shouted "GO!" and the two cops yanked open the screen door and tackled the man inside. There was a startled shout. Then she heard the cops yelling "On the floor! Hands behind your head!" and then Harrison was running, Diana right behind.

They led him out of the trailer, hands cuffed behind his back, an old man clad only in faded, blue boxer shorts. He seemed confused, staring around at the cops and the neighbors, his hair ruffled from sleep. His wife watched from the porch.

Harrison stopped them at the bottom steps and looked straight into the man's eyes. The man's lower lip quivered. He had a two-day old growth of stubble across his face. "Duwayne Marlin Potter, you are under arrest for the murders of Michelle Marie Roberts, Jennifer Lynn Sullivan, and Jacqueline Jeanne Potter." He pulled a white card from his shirt pocket and held it in front of Potter's face. "These are your rights," Harrison said, and he read them out loud, never once taking his eyes away from Potter. "Do you understand your rights, Mr. Potter?"

Potter looked around, dazed. "Rights?" He blinked and jerked once against the cops holding his arms. They tightened their grips. "But I didn't do nothing," he said. His eyes were wide with terror. "Kill? My daughter's dead? I didn't kill anybody."

Harrison slowly leaned his face down in to Potter's. He said it softly, slowly, behind gritted teeth. "Do you understand your rights, sir?"

Potter stared at him, then nodded.

"Say it."

"Yes. Yes, I understand. But — "

Harrison said, "Let the record indicate that the suspect has stated he understands his rights." To the cops, he said quietly, "Now get that dumbfuck out of here." The troopers pushed him into the back of a cruiser and slammed the door.

Harrison came up to Diana. "Sometimes I like this job. Hate the paperwork, though."

Diana stared through the windshield at Potter's pale silhouette. He was a child abuser, a drunk, a son of a bitch. A scared old man; and now all the meanness had been beaten out of him.

But was he a murderer?

The fingerprints on the knife and the bottle were certainly Duwayne

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Potter's. As she watched the police swarm over the trailer brandishing their search warrant, she knew they would eventually find enough evidence to put him away for life.

But did he really kill them? She did not believe he was psychologically strong enough to kill anyone — just weak enough to take out his anger and frustration on the people who loved him.

My daughter's dead? he had said, and Diana saw his eyes: wide, oblivious, uncomprehending.

She knew then that their deaths had been news to him.

Over the sounds of police radios and bystanders shouting questions to the cops, she heard Arlys Potter crying inside the trailer. Her daughter was dead and now gone up to Jesus, and Duwayne Potter would pay for his crimes against his family.

But as guilty as he was of violence and abuse, she knew inside that Duwayne was not capable of his daughter's murder.

Justice, as she knew, was usually blind.

The sun was up when she made it onto the James River Bridge, heading home. She felt drained and sticky, even with the air conditioner turned on *HI*. The radio was silent; she did not want to hear or think about anything. She just wanted to be numb.

She crossed into Newport News and passed the newspaper building without thinking once about going in. She had called her editor from Smithfield and explained the story. It was too late for today's edition, anyway, and she promised to have her story in for the next day's paper. Right now, she didn't give a damn.

She parked in front of her townhouse and sat for a moment in the parking lot, while the temperature rose around her. She felt nothing: no sadness, no pain; just a hollow feeling deep inside that threatened to explode like a balloon.

The headline would read GIRLS' BODIES FOUND IN SMITHFIELD, or GIRLS FOUND DEAD, BURIED. Or something trite and tasteless: MURDERED CHILDREN FOUND IN SHALLOW GRAVE. A paperback would be written eventually, a bright orange cover embossed with a grainy black and white photo of the father, led away in cuffs. It would be titled *A Country Killing*, or *One Family's Secret*, or *For the Sake of the Children: A Father's Hidden Madness*.

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She closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead hard. This was all coming apart, all too quick and surreal. She climbed out of the car and closed the door. She did not care if she locked it or not.

She let herself into the townhouse. She had left the lights off and the curtains closed when she left the night before, and the house was cool and dark. She poured herself a glass of cold water from the refrigerator and pushed off her shoes, stretching her toes.

Upstairs, she peeled off her moist clothes and sat in the dark bathroom for a long time, leaving only a night light on out in the hall. The aroma of her soaps and bath oils relaxed her, seeming to cleanse her senses of the night smells, of earth and blood. She washed her face and neck, scrubbing hard so her skin tingled, and she decided not to fight it, to go to sleep right now, yes, until noon, and then go to work.

To goddamn work.

She flicked off the night light and headed blind for the bedroom. She opened the door, then cried out in the darkness as the smell inside assaulted her. She fell to the floor and gasped for air.

The smell was strong, the heady richness of earth, the sweet stench *of blood*

of overripe fruit. Dirt stuck to her arm and hand, her legs. She could smell the smoke, the grease, absorbed into the dirt, and she brushed it off as she crawled to the window on her knees. She plucked at the drapes. A wedge of sunlight lit up the room, and she stared at the brown dirt that had been sprinkled in circles on the floor.

Her stomach clenched into a fist. An image flashed in her mind, of dark, mud-caked hands, of dirt jammed under fingernails. *Stevie,* she thought. Then her fluids came up, hot, spattering the carpet, across her leg. She felt the world weaving around her, her head too heavy, her vision a blur. She tried to stand, then fell hard onto her rear, her legs too weak to support her.

She started crawling toward the circles. She could dimly see they formed a smaller design to the ones in the barn; less intricate, yet still powerful enough to buzz like insects in her mind, drawing her forward with an unconscious tug.

Her stomach tightened in pain as she reached the edge of the circle. She cramped up and fell forward onto her face. Dirt smeared her lips, tasted metallic between her teeth.

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And she realized she was kissing the circles.

Circles

Three circles joined in the center. And in the center, wrapped in mud and fabric

a shirt

were the bundles from the barn.

She reached out and felt cold electricity tingle up her arm as she violated the boundary of the circles. Then she was inside, and she went limp, the pain and dizziness slowly evaporating. She took deep breaths and rested, felt cool sweat trickling down her back.

The bundle closest to her was wrapped in a mud-caked T-shirt; she could make out a drawing of Barbie on the front. The others were wrapped in what looked to be a blue tank top and a small flannel shirt. The material was stiff and dark with drying mud, coated inside with earth and bits of grass and twigs.

She crawled over to the closest bundle and looked inside the gap at the top. The dried, earthen mask inside had been cast from Michelle Roberts's face. A whorling, circular design had been etched in the forehead.

The life mask crumbled at her touch. Underneath, she glimpsed a swirl of light brown, and she carefully reached inside and scraped back the protective layers of drying mud.

The odor somehow seemed natural to her: rich, abundant with life. She smeared away the mud and inhaled deeply, staring at the pliant, gourd-like shape inside. It was mottled with swirls of white and brown, slick to the touch. It quivered as she brushed it with her fingers, and its skin rippled, unfurling a twist of hair. She touched the fur, softly, amazed at its silken feel, and she ran her hands down the length of its body. Fur uncurled all over, and as she caressed it, a small black snout poked out, and its tiny eyes blinked open, wincing at the early sunlight.

She smiled, feeling warm tears on her cheeks, and she brought the puppy to her breast as it stretched for the first time, mewling with newborn hunger.

She held the tiny thing up in her hands.

It was a girl.

She wept.

After the others were born, she washed the mud out of their fur and dried them with a blow drier. The corners of the bathroom were soon filled with tufts of brown and blonde fur. She let out the puppies and led them to the

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kitchen, where she fed them with bread and poured them bowls of water. She would buy some dog food in the afternoon.

Later, she aired out her bedroom and vacuumed up the dirt spread over the carpet. The room was filled with the sweet moistness of earth. It welcomed her softly, as it had nurtured the puppies, and in her mind she saw a tiny, green scarecrow silhouetted in Stevie's long, beautiful field.

She needed no explanations, then. Rose had been lost a long time ago, and it did not really matter how; and Stevie had been left to take care of the field, to watch and to love and protect.

Like the scarecrow.

She sat for a long time in the middle of the living room and played with the puppies, letting them jump and kiss all over her. She held the brown-haired puppy to her breast and laughed happily as a warm, wet stain spread down her shirt. *Will you be puppies like this forever?* she thought, kissing its tiny snout. *Will you live as long you should? Do you know who you are? Is this the kind of life you truly wanted? Or deserve?*

She held the puppies one by one and kissed them on their heads.

The girls were gone forever. But she had the puppies now, and she would make sure that their lives would be much richer, much fuller — and probably longer — than the grim lives the girls had lived with their parents.

It was a trade off, all right.

Maybe justice wasn't so blind after all.

In the afternoon, she called their names. The puppies ran to her instinctively. She lifted them onto her bed, and they all slept snuggled together for the first time, curled beside her stomach.

She slept easily, without waking.

And she dreamed of three little girls, laughing and playing in the sunshine, forever free.

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

SCIENTIST HEROES

EVERY READER of sf knows the Scientist As Hero, a stock character. He appears in titles as diverse as David Brin's *Earth*, James Gunn's *The Listeners*, Isaac Asimov's *The Gods Themselves* and Jack McDevitt's *The Hercules Text*. How real are these images?

Obviously, most of what scientists do is as exciting as watching grass grow. Progress is slow, incremental, and hard-won. But heroism can accrete.

Or perhaps, as was true of the Competent Man of Golden Age sf, we should speak of the Engineer Hero, who knew how things worked, including the world at large. Hence Robert Heinlein's cracker-barrel philosophy, riding atop genuine knowledge of how engineers and scientists thought and worked.

Compare today. Several years ago, the National Academy of Sciences held its annual election to membership. This is a major event, with review committees and nominations, taking much time.

Richard Feynman became so exasperated that he resigned his membership, saying that he saw no point in belonging to an organization which spent most of its time deciding who to let in. (He spent what he once described to me as his "easy extra time" — time not wasted on academic politics — doing art, playing bongos, and speaking to undergraduates, or even (surprise) non-scientists.)

In this recent election to the National Academy, the best known astronomer in the world was nominated. Each section of the Academy votes separately on all candidates, and the astronomy division voted the fellow in. Usually it's automatic.

But there were negative votes from other divisions, notably the particle physicists. They disliked his

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public persona, some said. He displayed an arrogant egomania, giving little credit to others. Others felt that he was really not up to caliber, despite his fame. Plainly, envy played some role, maybe a big one. Rumors flew. Personal axes were ground in full public view.

Rarely is a candidate turned down, but it happened this time. So it is that Carl Sagan is not a member of our National Academy.

He is world famous, principally for *Cosmos*. He has done solid work on planetary atmospheres since the early 1960s, but increasingly his time is filled with taking science to the greater world. Like Feynman and Hawking, he feels drawn to explain his field to others.

Many scientists don't think much of such endeavors. Sagan is a hero to millions, but not to his colleagues. Yet he stands for scientists in the public mind more than any other figure of our time: the scientist as popularizer/hero.

The opposite of popularized science, in the long run, is unpopular science.

That we see daily, in the scare-'em-with-science strategies of Hollywood movies, doomcrier personal liability lawyers, environmentalist Chicken Littles, and the many political tribes who seek new threats in every fresh technology. (And I make these comments as a member of about half a dozen environmental groups.)

All these have legitimate issues, but play the scary aspects to the hilt — because it works. Metaphorically, I suppose one could say that once we were a nation of Heinlein fans, and now we're a country of Stephen King readers.

We Americans, once the embodiment of Yankee ingenuity, have a national schizophrenia about science. We love its wonders, hate its threats, dread its manifest power.

Much of this comes from a public that simply doesn't know much science, or even how scientists think. Films and TV can routinely get away with mammoth plot boners. Radiation will make you grow an extra head, or create giant insects. Viruses spread instantaneously, even through hard vacuum. Spaceships bank and rumble like fighter planes. And mutations quite often cause super powers, of course.

If only the low levels of media were affected, fine. But we have legislatures which pass laws making pi equal three, exactly. Codes setting contamination standards higher than the purity of rainwater, so nature itself is "polluting" Lake Michigan. Dollars wasted on absurd safety requirements, while elsewhere people

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die for want. Politicians who consult horoscopes.

What can scientists do about this? Patiently try to get through to the broad public with the truth. But given that the media govern how many look at us, consider how the entire idea of the Scientist Hero emerged. As we make ready to depart this Century of Physics, it's a good time to glance backward, to the scientist-heroes who emerged at the end of the last century.

When Guglielmo Marconi arrived in England in 1896, just a century ago, he opened a window for the world. This is true in two senses of the word: the world of human drama, and the arcane world of physics.

Electromagnetism, with its precise distinctions and lofty equations, had dominated the airy reaches of late nineteenth century science. While it had already given much: the telegraph, electric lighting—its subject matter was still both terrifying (calling up visions of lightning and accidental electrocutions) and abstract (how could the flow of currents make something like light?).

Suddenly, the full panoply of electromagnetism yielded to the world of the engineer and entrepreneur.

In photos of that time we see Marconi seated beside his meticulously made capacitors and coils — but it is the face, not the hardware, that evokes power. Pale cheeks, boyishly smooth. A severe haircut and controlled, intense features; almost prim. Set in that austere face are penetrating eyes, their direct and almost disconcerting gaze seeming to take in the present and seek the future. A newspaper account referred to "the peculiar lustre of his eyes when he is interested or excited."

This quiet intensity helps explain the remarkable rise of a scientist-inventor in the hard world of business. He proved to be not merely a gifted technologist, a devoted visionary, but an uncommonly shrewd businessman.

In 1896 Marconi was a nobody from a distant land. His intense interest had sprung primarily from an accident. On vacation in the Italian Alps in 1895, the young man read an obituary article written by a family friend, physicist Augusto Righi. A professor at the University of Bologna, Righi lived near the family's beloved Villa Grifone. This drew the young man to visit Righi's lectures, putter in his laboratory, and learn to think systematically about nature.

The obituary concerned Heinrich Hertz, a young German physicist. In 1888 Hertz had shown that the grand, complex equations of

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James Clerk Maxwell were right. The electric and magnetic waves Hertz detected, with jumping sparks and small capacitors, moved with the speed of light.

This immediately inspired in speculative minds the notion that if one could orchestrate the charges and currents which made the waves, then a signaling device could transmit virtually instantaneously, over considerable distances.

Marconi did not get from Righi the belief that the "Hertzian waves" could be used to send signals; that leap was pure Marconi. Righi was interested in showing that the waves behaved like light. In the lab, this meant making shorter and shorter wavelengths, for better measurements of refraction, diffraction and other wave properties.

Marconi saw that signaling demanded longer waves. The two men quickly followed diverging paths. While Marconi got ideas from Righi's lab, they weren't working in the same regime. Soon the young "dabbler" was on his own, tinkering in his parents' attic.

Hertz himself had said that his waves could never be used to send signals over any useful distance, because they were so weak, the apparatus so delicate. Young Marconi thought this simply displayed lack of imagination. Years later he would declare, "Long experience has... taught me not to believe in the limitations indicated by purely theoretical considerations. These — as we well know — are based on insufficient knowledge of all the relevant factors."

He was no scientist and had little formal training. But he thought like a scientist, working by intuition and a relentless empirical sense. This young man of twenty-two did not invent wholly new devices, like Edison. His equipment did not differ fundamentally from the already known state of the art, either.

Instead, he sharpened and refined his "coherer" and antennas to achieve a new end. Radio-frequency detection in his hands went from laboratory curiosity to rugged practicality, able to take the hard knocks of day-to-day use on land and sea.

There is no greater modern tale of ingenuity breathtakingly rewarded than this. His character many found forbidding, for he was relentless in his focus on the next technical problem.

Throughout his life he fit the popular conception of a monk-like figure, peering so far ahead that he paid little attention to the rest of the world. Yet he founded a major business, too. When he bothered to ad-

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dress the ordinary, he could master it.

From his first experiments, Marconi focused on distance of transmission as the measure of success. He could have concentrated on tuning of circuits instead, for example.

Some physicists did just that, aiming to keep signals narrow-band and thus secret, harder to detect unless you came upon the same frequency. Their idea was that such a device could more practically compete with the wire telegraph, insuring secure messages. Their model was a better telegraph. So why distance?

Guglielmo Marconi had a hard-headed father. The young man could not himself buy the coils, batteries, copper sheets and wire for a laboratory, and his father was openly skeptical of his son's ideas. Small, laboratory-scale successes were no help. In one of the memorable moments of his life, he summoned his mother one night to the attic, and showed that he could control events purely with invisible waves.

But for his father, making a bell tinkle for his mother at the other end of a dusty attic would not convince.

To signal over the brow of the nearest hill, to a helper far out of sight — that was impressive. So his first victories, known only to his family, set the mold: distance, distance, distance.

Decades later, the mature Marconi labored long and hard; some feel that in the back of his mind he was still convincing a tight-fisted and doubtful father, and proving that his mother's faith had been right.

In his career we see the elevation to world fame of a man who turned his every effort to refining technical ideas and releasing them, to changing the human prospect. More strikingly than anyone of his time, he gave the world a new industry, a new way of thinking and of talking to itself.

He caught the public's imagination by snagging the mysterious Hertzian waves with a kite antenna. Few cared that Benjamin Franklin's kite string had served the same purpose in 1752, picking up electrical discharges from nearby thunderstorms. Few knew that Englishmen and Russians had experimented with vertical antennas (much like lightning rods) before Marconi. Or that others had devised the "ground effect" of using the Earth itself as one end of a dipolar antenna system.

It lay to Marconi to put all this lore together with a concrete aim: transmission over distance. He did not know why vertical antennas worked better than horizontal ones.

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Almost incidentally, the vertical variety were easier to support, so he could make them larger. He sensed that the bigger structure was thus sensitive to longer wavelengths. This was the point, though no one, not even Hertz, knew a crucial scientific fact: longer wavelengths can follow the curve of the earth, yielding greater range. To Marconi, the explanation had to come after the application. Others figured it out after he discovered the effect. He brought new physics from over the conceptual horizon.

In this intuitive approach he was right. His style of thinking big delivered fresh science.

Laboratories give us information about events on the scale of rooms; Marconi built antennas the size of stadiums. And eventually, he paid back his debt to the physicists. In his headlong pursuit of distance, Marconi began discovering other nagging effects which existing physics could not explain.

He was the first exploiter of the waves who also fed scientifically useful problems back to the scientists (a common event in sf, rare in reality). This makes him stand out from the rough-and-ready inventors of that golden era, such as Edison. He became a crucial pivot between the abstract and the practical.

His beloved Italy rejected the young inventor, and scientists sometimes dismissed his "mere engineering." But aside from his impish joy in refuting physicists' theories, he showed little rancor. Restless, he simply kept going to the last day of his life.

As popular imagery often depicts, the ambitious scientist paid a price in his personal life for his legendary isolation and focus. The scientific and technical side of the man made him a looming presence, casting shadows into the lives of all near him. It is a sobering lesson in the cost of greatness.

He pounded away at the one crucial aspect of radio: no wires. Ships could use it, he showed. The *Titanic* carried new Marconi radios, and used them to call for help in its terrible death. This saved most of the passengers.

They were taken to New York, where by coincidence Marconi was exploring new business opportunities and conferring with American scientists. When the passengers learned that he was staying in a nearby hotel, they marched as a body through the streets, called him down from his room, and filled the lobby with a prolonged ovation. Few scientist heroes ever get such a vindication.

Many compare Marconi to Edison, the other great figure of the

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time, but their popular roles were very different. Edison spanned a period of enormous technological change, from 1847 to 1931. Unlike Marconi, Edison played to the public, creating a media image. He became the subject of novels and in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* critic John Clute names a class of stories for him: the "edisonade."

John Clute defines this class by its depiction of a young inventor who uses his talents to get out of tight spots, battling corrupt enemies and freeing his nation from oppressors.

The hero doesn't just invent weapons, as Archimedes did to repel Roman invaders. His invention also serves to transport him, often beyond the conventional horizons. "The edisonade is not only about saving the country (or planet) through personal spunk and native wit, it is also about lighting out for the Territory." Huck Finn with a wrench.

Clute believes the invention serves as well as a certificate of ownership, bringing the young man wealth: "to tinker with is to own." This describes a small list of obvious edisonades: *Edison's Conquest of Mars* (1898) was a direct American reply to Wells's *The War of the Worlds*. E.E. Smith's Skylark of Space series fits, expanding the arena to the galaxy. Often the ingenious inventions are electrical, echoing the dominant new technology.

Clute takes the edisonade metaphor on to the Competent Man of the Golden Age, with Heinlein and others giving the gritty real feel of how innovation occurs. Edison was something of a self-advertiser, sometimes bragging about inventions he hadn't made yet and never did. This seems similar to L. Ron Hubbard's Church of Scientology, when advertised itself as a real, engineering answer to mental problems.

Clute maintains that the deep lesson of the edisonade is that "to tinker is to own," but this impulse is common to all expansionist worldviews. Alexei Tolstoy, a distant relative of Leo, wrote a communist edisonade in 1922, *Aelita*. A Red Army commissar goes to Mars and finds it dreadfully capitalist, so he lectures the slaving masses, who then overthrow the system in bloody fashion. Later he wrote the even more obvious *Engineer Garin and his Death Ray*, in which a fanatical communist scientist defeats and rules the USA.

So there's nothing particularly capitalist about the Engineer-Scientist Hero pushing back the frontiers. Expansionist societies reach for the same metaphorical figures.

I read a rather different slant in

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all this. Much of sf, not just the edisonade, embraces a larger idea: to know is to control. Of course there is a geometric resonance between opening up a frontier and expanding knowledge: the "conceptual breakthrough" model of the classic sf story.

Yet unlike all these fictions, the root motivation is *knowing*, not controling, and certainly not the puffing up of the hero. Truth be told, in modern science, even superstars can bask only briefly in the sun.

Science itself has few heroes. Its history can be evoked by quoting names we all know: Darwin, Newton, Archimedes. Yet in a sense scientific greatness is, for virtually all scientists, curiously impersonal. Even the winners of this year's Nobel in science, after brief appearances in the headlines, will revert to being just names to most of us, and often even less.

I had the unusual experience of coming into my office at the University of California at Irvine one morning in October, 1995 — exactly a century after Marconi first transmitted signals over several kilometers — to find that two of my friends had won Nobels. I share a secretary with Fred Reines, who was honored for discovering the neutrino. Sherry Roland, one floor above me, won in chemistry for his prediction that the ozone layer was being depleted by chlorine compounds.

The hubbub following, with TV cameras and champagne and corps of administrators beaming, red-faced, was heady and yet sobering. Nobels elevate scientists into stars, but the thread of the work itself runs contrary to that.

Almost all great discoveries are made by collaborations. This is inevitable in large projects, but it's also deep in the separate scientific culture. Science is cross-talk. Oddly, this makes the presentation of results more impersonal, for it represents a collective voice.

Sure, science is made by people, but it strives to be above its origins, to approach impersonality. "Natural philosophy," as it was termed before "science" was coined in the early nineteenth century, strives for objective truth.

One immediate reason why scientific discoveries lose their personal touch is the way they are presented publicly. Centuries ago, scientific letters and papers resembled autobiographies. The experimenter described the difficulties of building his apparatus; theoreticians commented sourly on tedious calculations. Gradually that style lost favor. The modern scientific paper is icy and impersonal.

Papers begin — or should! —

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with clear assumptions, then march through an orderly development, reaching well-set-out conclusions. Seldom do you hear of the hesitations, self-doubts, errors or blind alleys that the author went through. In part this is good, but it does rob us of the real story of how science is actually done.

Beyond this, there is something about the texture of science that *absorbs* personality. Couching our results in "objective" terms hides the author; modern scientific prose often uses the passive voice. "The electron was caused to strike the foil" is not only awkward, it also disguises who did the deed.

As George Orwell warned in his classic essay, "Politics and the English Language," many modern institutions prefer this kind of writing because it obscures responsibility. It also pictures a world where events occur without active human presence. Bureaucrats will probably cling to these devices, but science should not have to; it is simply a bad habit.

Deeper than this, however, science has a history of smothering the personal touch. Results are absorbed.

Particularly outstanding discoveries are often labeled with the originator's name. After a decade of so, the name will fall away, the discoverer footnoted into obscurity. Soon even the footnote vanishes. The discovery becomes a building block in a grander edifice. These alabaster cathedrals of knowledge seldom preserve the personal dash and verve of the architects.

Only the rare genius is so penetrating in his insights and style that, after him, the style of science cannot be the same. For example, Einstein perfected the modern device of the "gedanken," or thought experiment. This is a way of clarifying physical points by imagining simple experiments so clean that they illuminate basic physical mechanisms. The experiment is in the head, a mental exercise clearer than the messy details of real laboratories.

Many of the ideas of quantum mechanics and relativity were first argued in this way. Gedanken experiments sweep away all the obscuring undergrowth of previous ideas, enabling us to isolate the essential points. Einstein made this approach part of the very fabric of physics. Whenever a physicist frames a gedanken experiment to prove his point, he is invoking the spirit of Einstein and the flavor of his thinking.

Such genius is very unusual in the sciences, however. Even though Newton's ideas pervade physics, his own works are almost never read by

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scientists as part of their education. The specific savor of Newton is in some sense unimportant to the scientific tradition. Perhaps the same will happen to Einstein's writings, except perhaps his popularizations. I have read about half a dozen of his original papers, but in a century, how many will bother? Yet they have a flavor, a style, difficult to convey.

Science rolls on, and the vast army behind it is transparent; unseen. Sometimes names remain, but not men.

Contrast this with the arts, where a creator is often prominent because of his idiosyncratic way, personal insight or evocative language. His work carries forward some fraction of the man. So long as that fragment strikes a resonance in people, he lives on in some sense.

Shakespeare, from the same era as Newton and a comparable genius, is still read for himself. It is unthinkable to "know" Shakespeare by reading derivative texts.

C.P. Snow, the English scientist and novelist, felt that this anonymity was a drawback of scientific life. Snow witnessed the rise of Big Science, which further buries the individual investigator. Scientists can make important discoveries working in groups; painters, writers, and composers cannot — as the collective artistic projects of the 1930s showed. There is something in the selfless quality of science that scientists have come to accept and that artists by temperament (and perhaps for deeper reasons) never will.

Snow tells a story about the great English mathematician G.H. Hardy. One day he and a colleague were crossing Trafalgar Square in London, which is dominated by a statue of Admiral Lord Nelson. A tall column lifts the statue high above the crowd, testifying to Nelson's eminence.

"If you had a statue of yourself on a column in London," Hardy's colleague proposed, "would you prefer the column be so high that the statue was invisible, or low enough for the features to be recognizable?"

Hardy remarked dryly that he would make the first choice — what he did was important, not who he was. Not all scientists agree: C.P. Snow would clearly prefer the second choice. But then, he was also a novelist of distinction.

Of course, the issue is not so clear cut. Certainly we know Aeschylus the man better than Archimedes, in the sense that we feel Aeschylus's emotions (or something like them — how can we tell?) directly when we watch his plays.

But one could argue that the scholarly job of discovering the beauty

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of Euclidean geometry is as direct a communication of the human spirit as is a painting or a novel. Such communication has deep emotional elements; the young Bertrand Russell called the Euclidean theorems "delightful certainties."

But, on balance, the C.P. Snow view has much weight: scientific creation carries little of one's personality forward. Your work is subsumed, digested. Often, if your name lives it is for something besides your most "professional" work.

The prominent theoretical physicist Freeman Dyson has done complex mathematics, and also has framed interesting speculations about huge spacecraft propelled by hydrogen bombs, advanced civilizations that can absorb all the radiation from a star, and similar ideas. Dyson noted recently that he will be remembered for the highly personal speculations, which took much less time, and his calculations will be recalled by a mere handful. Such is the nature of science and the way it is done.

But, in the end, does it matter? Few if any do scientific work to gain "immortality" which, after all, usually means repute for perhaps a century or two. Scientists work long hours and shoptalk endlessly, to the despair of their mates, because it is *fun*. The thought that "my work may live forever" is probably an afterthought, perhaps a hollow boast.

If we truly believed that, we would be fools. History is filled with men honored to extravagance in their times, men who must have felt themselves eternal greats — and who were promptly forgotten. The composer Telemann vastly overshadowed Bach in their day — who shines forth now?

Marconi and Edison gave us emblematic scientists for the first part of this century, Einstein for later. Sagan was wounded by his rejection from the National Academy, but to my mind it makes him rather more of a hero than he was. Science needs its popularizers more than ever, and it is at times a lonely path.

So it is probably best to learn an important lesson from history, and — whether you are artist or scientist — to shrug off the future.

Have fun, instead. It's the point.

Comments and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. For e-mail: gbenford@uci.edu.

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Finally we come to the Alan Brennert story featured in the editorial. Alan wrote "The Refuge" while he was writing a screenplay of the same story for Showtime's The Outer Limits. *While we were preparing "The Refuge" for publication,* Outer Limits *won a Cable Ace Award. Science fiction is slowly getting recognition in the mainstream media, and it is excellent stories like this one that make such recognition possible.*

The Refuge

By Alan Brennert

WINTER SCREAMED ITS DISCONTENT. Another blast of frigid wind and freezing rain lashed at the man wading through knee-deep snowdrifts; the icy rain, needle-sharp, blinded and buffeted him, as it had for — how long? He didn't know. He had no way of telling how long he had been here, lost under sunless skies, in the cold, brutal heart of the storm. The pearl-gray sheen of the clouds hinted at daylight, but could not tell him how many hours he had struggled, through snow draped like a pall across the coffin of the forest floor. Hours of bitter wind that chafed and burned; of snow turning to sleet turning to hail turning back to snow again. Nor could it tell him how he got here, or where he was; his mind, it seemed, was as clouded, as opaque, as the sky itself.

He did know some things: he knew that his name was Raymond Bava; could see his mother's face, feel the rough tickle of his father's beard as he lifted young Ray into his arms. He could see faces, hear voices, summon up names of lovers and family and friends...but there was no progression to the images, no order from which to construct a life, or a memory of a life. And at

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the moment, it was hardly a priority. He had a vague recollection of growing up in winters like these; he knew the signs of frostbite, of chilblains, as well as anyone. He knew that if he did not find shelter soon, he would be dead — and then it wouldn't matter who he was, or where he grew up, the work he had done or the lovers he had known. And so he stumbled on, damning whatever fates had brought him here so ill-prepared: as his bootless shoes sank foot-deep into the snow; as the rain soaked through his light cotton jacket; as his frostbitten fingers grew colder, harder, paler.

Suddenly another blast of wind caught him, tossing him off-handedly into a snowbank, losing him some of his hard-won ground. He shouted an obscenity into the air, but all it did was plunge an icy blade of air into his lungs and he instantly regretted it. For a moment, his pain and despair got the better of him — how hard could it be, he wondered, to just close his eyes, to cease the struggle? But the beginnings of delirium proved his salvation: he had begun to think of the storm as a living thing — a killing thing which existed to kill *him*, which would take considerable joy in his slow, painful demise. "God *damn* you," he whispered, once again taking in a gulp of frigid air, this time invigorating him; "I'll be damned if I'll make it easy for you." Fueled by an irrational, delirious hatred, he pushed himself to his feet and continued on.

The forest of dead skeletal trees — gaunt sentries standing watch over some long-lost redoubt — gave way to a low rise. Reflexively he climbed it, skidding more than once on the icy drifts, finally gaining its small summit. He expected, frankly, to see nothing: nothing but denuded trees, icy rain, and drifted snow.

He was wrong.

Down below, in a clearing at least a hundred yards across...there was a house.

Ray stared, dumbstruck, at the sight: an enormous, two-story, Southern Colonial mansion, fronted by a colonnade, a gabled roof crowning a white clapboard facade...its balustrades and shuttered windows miraculously untouched by the raging blizzard.

Elation quickly gave way to disbelief. This couldn't be real. Nothing so fragile, so beautiful, could stand unravaged in this murderous storm. It had to be part of his delirium: a hallucination, a winter's mirage.

He started to turn away from it, in disgust.

Turning, he caught a glimpse of something in the window.

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It was a big, three-part window on the ground floor; warmly lit from within. It stood at an angle to him, but there was a flash of movement, a shadow in the glass, and he adjusted his position to get a better look.

There were people inside. At least two men; at least one woman. The woman had a champagne glass in her hand; one of the men was taking a pull on a fat cigar; another scarfed up a canapé in one bite. They laughed, ate, drank. A fire burned invitingly in the hearth.

They were having a *party*, for God's sake.

Slowly, Ray began to laugh. It was so absurd, so unlikely, that it was either real...or a damned fine piece of delirium. Either way, he chose to embrace it. Given a choice of dying with hope, or without it, he opted for the former. He scrambled down the icy slope into the clearing, ready to embrace the illusion — to let it swallow him whole. But strangely, the closer he got to the mansion, the more real it seemed: he could make out faces behind the glass, could tell what kind of hors d'oeuvres the partiers were nibbling, could almost taste the wine in their fluted glasses. He was almost there now, a few dozen yards from the rear porch —

Then, suddenly, something was screaming, and he realized it was him.

At first he thought he'd been hit by another blast of frozen rain and snow — but no. This was different. This was worse. Not wet force, but dry; not cold but not hot, either. Like sticking your finger in a light socket, only a hundred times more intense. Dimly, through the pain, he became aware that he was hanging suspended, a foot off the ground — impaled on the air itself — while all around him that air crackled and burned with something that was not quite electricity, but close. His body shook like a rag doll caught on the spokes of a bicycle; his clothes started to smoke, and smolder; he screamed, louder than any scream forced from him by the storm, and he knew now that he had another enemy, a far more terrible one.

All at once, that enemy threw him backward, and he fell, burning and freezing, into a snowbank.

He fought to retain consciousness; to get to his feet. But his spasming body wouldn't obey him. He looked up at the house, his vision blurry as rain off a windshield, barely able to make out the partiers — oblivious to his plight, their smiles and laughter unknowingly mocking him.

He tried to call out to them, but could hardly make a sound. His head dropped back onto a cold pillow of snow, and he finally surrendered, to old enemies and new.

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The first thing he felt, as he drifted back to consciousness, was warmth. He couldn't recall having done anything to warrant going to Hell, but there was so much he didn't remember, he couldn't rule out the possibility either. Still, it was a moist warmth, gentle and comforting — if anything, heavenly — and, slowly, he opened his eyes.

He was lying, naked, in a metal tub filled with warm water. There were whorls and eddies of motion up one limb and down another — nanomachines, he guessed, circulating the water, massaging those parts of him that needed it most. He shifted slightly, then felt a gentle touch on his shoulder.

"Take it easy," a woman's voice said. "Don't try to sit up."

He looked up to find a woman in a nurse's uniform sitting beside him: brunette, with glistening shoulder-length hair, and a sweet, sensitive face in which he read concern, compassion, relief.

He tried to say something, but his voice was a hoarse rasp. She reached over to a table, handed him some water; it tasted sweet, like glucose, and he drank it thirstily. He looked at her again, managing a small smile. "What," he said, his voice barely better than a croak, "no bubble bath?"

She returned the smile. "Believe it or not," and her voice was as sweet as her face, "bubble bath is considered optional in cases of hypothermia."

He tried to laugh; it needed work. She gave him some more of the hydrating solution, and as he drank it he took in his surroundings for the first time. He was in what seemed to be a small infirmary — three beds, an exam table, medical telemetry along one wall. At the far end of the room were two doors, one marked RADIOLOGY, the other SURGERY. And at the near end, an older man in a white doctor's coat stood in a doorway which led into some sort of anteroom.

"Gina?" He was in his late fifties, Ray judged, his face deeply lined — a nervous wisp of a man. "May I speak with you?".

The woman — Gina? — glanced at him with a trace of disdain, quickly covered up. She kept her tone crisp; professional. "Of course, Doctor. Just let me get him out of the immersion bath."

The man nodded once and retreated into the anteroom. Gina turned back to Ray. "Think you can stand up?"

Ray nodded. As he stood, the whorls and eddies of water became ripples moving away from him, as the nanos flocked together like a school of

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invisible fish, retreating as one to a safe corner of the tub. As Gina began toweling him off, he felt a sudden flush of self-consciousness; in the water, irrational as it seemed, he'd somehow felt less — exposed.

She asked him his name.

He told her, smiling a bit sheepishly. "I, uh, don't usually show quite this much of myself to someone before I'm introduced."

She smiled back. "Never? Are you sure?"

He laughed, but in fact he *wasn't* sure. And now that he was no longer in danger of losing his life, the gaps in his memory became more important — and not a little frightening. Suddenly he felt wobbly; weak on his feet.

Gina steadied him. "Lean on me." Her grip was strong and steady, and she led him the four or five steps to one of the beds. "You're a lucky man, Mr. Bava. Most of the frostbite was superficial; you'll have a few blisters, but that's all. How long were you out there?"

Ray slipped his legs under the covers. "I...I don't know..."

"Where were you coming from? Another enclave?"

The more he tried to remember, the less he was sure of, but he fought back a stab of panic and said, calmly, "I...don't know that, either. I'm having trouble...remembering things..."

She nodded, unsurprised. "Side effect of the infection. We all have it to varying degrees."

"Infection?"

"The bacteria? You remember that?"

He looked at her, rather blankly, he imagined. "No," he said, "I guess I don't."

"Don't worry about it just now," she said gently. Her fingers touched him lightly on the arm, and he felt a tingle that had nothing to do with the warm water or the cool air.

"Hold still, now." She pressed a blunt-edged hypo against his bare shoulder; he felt a sharp jab, then the familiar, and oddly erotic, sensation of a nanochip entering his bloodstream. He dimly recalled reading that something like eighty percent of men and women found it peculiarly sensual, having a tiny stranger moving inside them...

Gina was saying, "The chip's manufacturing an antibiotic to ward off infection in the damaged tissues, as well as a mild sedative. You looked like you needed it." She touched his arm again. "It should also help balance your electrolytes. Now sit tight, I'll be back in a minute."

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As she started to leave, Ray called out, "You didn't tell me your name."

She smiled. "Gina. Gina Beaumont." She closed the door behind her, and Ray leaned back and closed his eyes, enjoying the warmth of the blankets against his skin. The sedative started to take hold, relaxing him for the first time in God knew how long — but he was still alert enough to hear, moments later, the sound of voices raised from the next room:

" — What in God's name were you *thinking* of?" The older man's voice. Thin, reedy, shrill with fear.

"I was *thinking* of saving his life." Gina. Angry. "Another ten minutes out there and he'd probably be dead."

"He might've infected the entire refuge—"

"I implemented decontamination protocols in the airlock. There was never any risk and you know it..."

Ray tried to follow the rest, but the combination of the sedative and his complete exhaustion conspired to lull him to sleep. He didn't dream, exactly, but again thought he heard voices — Gina's again, and someone else's, a deeper male voice with a hard, quiet edge to it, like steel inside silk:

— should have come to me before you let him in, Ms. Beaumont... certain procedures we need to observe —

There was a man freezing to death out there. Frostbite, hypothermia. I had to do something —

And now the old doctor's voice: *I told her not to. I* ordered *her not to —*

Oh, shut up, Franklin. The silken/steely voice again. Franklin quickly shut up...

At length, the voices faded; when he awoke, he had no idea how much time had passed, but Gina was standing above him, smiling gently, and Ray discovered that that was all that mattered to him, just now. "Feeling better?" she asked.

Ray's body ached less, and he felt rested for the first time he could remember. He nodded. "How long was I was out?"

"You took a ten-hour catnap," came a familiar voice beside her. Ray looked up at the tall, powerfully built man towering by his bedside. "Give or take a few days," he said with a laugh. He was a robust, handsome man in his sixties, his face hardly lined, with a full head of silver-white hair; he was wearing an impeccably cut gray three-piece suit. He smiled and extended a hand. "I'm Sanford Valle. Welcome to the Refuge."

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Ray took his hand. Valle had the kind of too-hard grip men of physical power often used to gauge a stranger's mettle, or, alternately, to intimidate them; Ray was still too weak to play the game, though he did wonder about the kind of man who would play it with someone in a hospital bed.

"'Refuge'?" Ray said. Even in his bewildered condition he could hear the capital R in Valle's voice when he said the word.

"I built it," Valle said proudly. "Before the collapse. It's totally self-contained, self-supporting. Protected from the elements by that particle barrier you encountered."

Ray blinked, trying once again to find something in his memory which would jibe with *anything* he'd seen or heard so far. "What do you mean — 'collapse'?"

Valle glanced at Gina and Franklin. "His memory loss is particularly severe, isn't it?"

"Look," Ray said, more irritated than afraid now, "just where the hell *am* I? Alaska?"

Valle, Gina, and Franklin exchanged rueful glances.

"Not quite," Valle said dryly. "Try Florida."

IT BEGAN AT AN OIL RIG off the coast of Tierra del Fuego, and, name notwithstanding, the world did not end in fire. The sonic drill used to sink the well was old technology to OPEC, but to the owners of the platform — a small Chilean petroleum combine — it was proudly state of the art. They sank the well deeper than anyone in the region ever had — a good two thousand feet below sea level. So deep into the continental slope, in fact — gouging into Precambrian bedrock — that they inadvertently unearthed bacteria which hadn't seen the light of day in billennia.

Not that anyone had known that, at first. The first hint of trouble didn't come until a week later, when the workers on the oil rig awoke one morning to find the waters surrounding them strangely transformed — into a gelatinous mass stretching a hundred yards in every direction, and six hundred feet straight down, to the ocean floor itself (asphyxiating all marine life unfortunate enough to become trapped in it).

A gelatinous mass which seemed, moreover, to be expanding at an alarming rate...

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Tests quickly confirmed that the substance was, in fact, water — but a *new* kind of water. The bacteria had apparently polymerized the sea water, altering its molecular structure, creating a fourth state of water: not liquid, solid, or gaseous, but something inbetween. Its properties were similar to conventional water — but significantly different in one respect:

Whereas normal water froze at thirty-two degrees Fahrenheit, polymerized water "froze" — that is to say, solidified — at a relatively balmy *fifty* degrees. And it didn't "thaw out" — that is, revert to its gelatinous state — until the water temperature hit sixty.

Inside of three days, there were massive "ice" floes in the Strait of Magellan. Within a week, the bacteria had spread beyond the Strait into the Atlantic; within two weeks, the Brazil Current had carried it into the Gulf Stream, and from the Gulf Stream it drifted into the North Atlantic Current. Every drop of water it touched turned into polywater, as it became known, and unless the oceans and rivers were *very* warm, the polywater promptly "froze."

It was summer, and in the tropics it *was* warm enough for the polywater not to freeze. Even warm enough, in places, that the polywater turned into its gaseous state, carrying the ancient bacteria aloft on trade winds, into the Jet Stream, and over land — where it found its way to landlocked lakes, rivers, reservoirs. Within six months, half the Earth's oceans, and virtually every source of fresh water in North America, Europe, and Asia, had all had been polymerized.

Of course, it wasn't really "ice" in the conventional sense — at fifty degrees, it was warm ice at best. And as damaging as the transformation was to the ecosphere, it was not a catastrophe. Yet.

Clouds, "seeded" by the bacteria, turned to "ice" crystals. Snow — "hot snow," the media called it — began falling over most of the world, carpeting both land and solidified oceans with a thick dusting of white, "hot" snow.

Snow which only melted in warmer climates. Snow which, in unprecedented quantities, reflected the sun's light and heat back into space — raising the earth's albedo from thirty percent to over *seventy* percent. And with no easy way for humanity to melt more than a fraction of the snow, the world plunged into a new Ice Age.

Over the next several years, temperatures dropped, globally, over thirty degrees. Power plants shut down; crops failed; those who didn't die of exposure, died from hunger.

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A long, endless winter. "The Earth," Valle said soberly, "would never see another spring."

Ray listened to Valle's story with a mix of horror and disbelief. The two men stood in the Refuge's conservatory, an elegantly furnished room the size of a softball field, with high vaulted ceilings and enormous bay windows overlooking the eternal storm raging outside.

"I saw the writing on the wall," Valle was saying, though Ray was too much in shock by now to truly hear him. "Converted my winter home into a kind of sanctuary. It uses geothermal power, and draws water from a well so deep it hasn't been touched by the polymers." He turned to Ray. "The snow out there — the icy rain — it's all contaminated. So were you. Fortunately, the human body manufactures antibodies which kill the bacteria and reverts the polywater to normal, though not without side effects — chills, fever, memory loss."

Ray struggled to assimilate everything he'd just heard. "If antibodies can kill it," he said slowly, "can't you somehow — "

"Reverse the process?" Valle shook his head. "Too much ice, and too few humans left to manufacture antibodies."

Ray shuddered at the implications of that.

"Jesus Christ," he said softly. "How...how many others have...survived?"

"Worldwide? Hard to say. Atmosphere's so occluded radio reception's marginal at best, but I hear reports of concentrations of population in places like Iceland and Japan, where geothermal energy's been used longest. The U.S. and other industrialized countries had the money and technology to build shelters, but even so, I can't imagine that there are more than a hundred thousand people left alive in all of North America."

All at once, Ray saw again the sad convocation of faces which was the closest thing he had to a past: friends, family, lovers, a high school sweetheart, a college roommate; each of them existing in a vacuum, divorced from time or chronology, but each evoking a very specific emotion, each bringing a stab of love or affection, anger or yearning. And now — all of them gone. Long dead; lost in the storm. Tears sprang to his eyes; he wished that he had been lost as well, rather than know what he now knew...

Valle placed a hand on Ray's arm with surprising gentleness. "I know what you're going through. We've all lost a great deal...friends, family, careers. I was a businessman, that was my whole life, perhaps too much so.

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That's all gone now, obviously. But the pleasure in business comes, in no small part, from overcoming resistance; from striving to overcome. That's what this refuge is all about. Resisting. Resisting death. Not just our own, but the death of the race, the death of striving itself. You understand?"

Ray thought of how he had survived the storm, and nodded. He did understand. Valle smiled. "You've had a hell of a day. Let's get you to your room."

En route, Ray had to admit to himself that the Refuge was indeed everything Valle made it out to be. There was a hydroponics garden for raising fresh vegetables and fruit; Valle assured him there were enormous stores of other foodstuffs as well, "everything from filet mignon to chocolate bars." There was an exercise room, a games room, an indoor pool — all outfitted with sun lamps for the residents' daily dose of Vitamin D. The decor was opulent but not offensively so, tasteful antiques and dark woods, artwork ranging from Picasso to Andrew Wyeth. Oddly, Ray saw no servants, but he supposed that they must be elsewhere; it was, after all, a big house.

Finally, Valle ushered him into what would be Ray's room — a comfortable suite with a window looking out on the low rise down which Ray had clambered so desperately, so recently...

"I took the liberty of having some clothes brought up for you." Valle opened a wardrobe closet; inside were half a dozen trousers, shirts, assorted socks and underwear, and two sport coats. "You're about the same size and build as my son; he generously donated a few of his outfits."

"Your son?" It was the first mention Valle had made of him. "How many others are here? In the Refuge?"

"You make eight. You'll meet them all soon enough — dinner's at seven. Main dining room, downstairs to your left. Casual attire." He smiled ruefully. "We like to think of this as an *informal* apocalypse."

"I...do appreciate your hospitality," Ray said, a bit awkwardly. "I realize I'm not exactly here by invitation."

Valle smiled. "Nonsense. We needed new blood. See you at dinner." And he left, leaving Ray to think about the things he'd said, and the things he hadn't. New blood? Did he mean that literally? Unlikely; eight people wasn't a large enough gene base to repopulate, not by a long shot. And why only eight people in a mansion this size?

Ray rubbed at his eyes, feeling fatigue and depression wash over him. He tried, fitfully, to get a few hours' sleep; but even as he lay on the comfortable

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double bed, the faces of his past, the past he might never recover, still haunted him. He actually found himself hoping that he *didn't* regain more of his memory — more of his life to be pronounced dead on arrival...

At six-thirty he showered, shaved, picked out slacks, shirt, and a sport coat, and headed down the corridor toward the staircase to the first floor. As he did, he heard a woman's voice — slightly tinny; as though it were a recording — coming from one of the suites just ahead. A voice punctuated by occasional — applause?

He stopped at a half-open doorway at the end of the corridor, and cautiously peeked inside. There was a TV playing in the middle of the large sitting room, a tape running in the VCR. On the screen was a beautiful young woman in her late thirties — auburn hair, warm eyes, a kind gaze and infectious smile. She stood on an auditorium stage, microphone in hand, addressing a large and enthusiastic audience:

"Miracles *do* happen," she was saying, and, remarkably, there was nothing unctuous in her tone as she said it. "Miracles live in your heart." A smattering of applause from the crowd. "Every time you do a kindness for another person," she went on, "it's a miracle. Every time you throw a little light into a darkened room, it's a miracle..."

Intrigued by the woman's easy manner and obvious charisma, Ray stepped forward to get a closer look—

A woman suddenly appeared in the doorway. A haggard woman, with stringy hair and wild unfocused eyes, her mouth a grim line of anger. She stared at Ray with indignation, as though he were intruding on her privacy — which he supposed he was.

"I — I'm sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to — "

It took a moment before he recognized her: it was the woman from the tape...but profoundly different. She was a ghost of her former self, a revenant in flesh — the kindness gone from her eyes, the smile blasted from her face, her easy, relaxed manner now rigid and almost — paranoiac.

He started to apologize again — but she slammed shut the door before he could finish. Good God, he thought: what had happened to *her*? Though on second thought, he wasn't sure he really wanted to know. He moved on, shaken.

He descended a winding Gothic staircase into the main dining room — a large, slightly ostentatious banquet hall. At the long dining table, five out

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of the seven residents of the Refuge were already seated; an elaborate dinner of pheasant, julienne potatoes, paté, and Caesar salad was already laid out, though no one was yet eating, presumably waiting for Ray and — that woman upstairs? And who else?

Valle rose, gestured him over. "Mr. Bava. Let me make a few introductions. You've met our resident physician, Franklin Dreeden...and Nurse Beaumont, of course..."

Ray smiled, nodding a hello to them both. Gina smiled back, but Franklin just gave him a cold glance and a short nod. Still annoyed, no doubt, at the circumstances of Ray's arrival. Next, Valle gestured to a stylishly dressed couple on the opposite side of the table: a young man in his early thirties, sandy hair, pretty-boy handsome though with an unappealing curl to his lip and narrowness to his eyes, wearing a dark blazer. Beside him was a beautiful woman, also in her thirties, a chic gown draped over her model-thin body, her dark blonde hair piled high in a loose French twist; the hairstyle accented her sharp, angular, but undeniably alluring features. "My son, Thomas, and his lovely wife, Justine..."

Ray extended a hand to the young man. "I guess you're the one I thank," he said. "For giving me the shirt off your back."

Not only didn't Thomas smile, he waited just a moment too long to take Ray's hand. "Yes. Well," he said, "thank my father. The source of all good things."

Justine sighed. "Graciousness is not among my husband's virtues, I'm afraid," she apologized. "Welcome to our little sanctuary, Mr. Bava."

She gestured him to sit in the empty seat beside her, which he did; her gaze seemed to linger on him a bit longer than necessary. At first Ray thought he was imagining it, but it was obviously not lost on Thomas, either, whose scowl deepened.

The sixth guest now returned to the table: a stunning young woman with teased, honey-blonde hair, sashaying in on stiletto heels, her impressive décolletage accented by a tight, low-cut minidress. She glanced at Ray with a paradoxically sweet smile. "Sorry," she said breathily. "Little girls' room."

As she sat at Valle's side, he placed a proprietary hand on her shoulder. "My fiancée, Debi."

Debi giggled. "One B, one I."

Justine leaned in to Ray and muttered, "One for each brain cell," just loud enough for all to hear. Debi tried not to show her hurt. Valle seemed either

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not to hear, which was unlikely, or not to care. He glanced up. "And unless we have another visitor of whom I'm unaware, I believe we're all here now..."

The haggard woman was descending the staircase, her expression stony, only her eyes — smoldering with the embers of some unknown rage — betraying anything of her inner life. She wore a long, shroud-like gray dress, no makeup, her hair perfunctorily clipped behind her. She walked slowly, mechanically, as though uncomfortable in her own body — resentful of it, perhaps.

As she approached the table, Valle gestured toward Ray. "Sister Angelique. I'd like you to meet — "

"We've met," Angelique said, her voice flat. She didn't even glance in Ray's direction as she settled herself directly opposite Valle and his "fiancée." Then, with no preamble, she looked at Debi and declared, "You dress like a whore."

A chorus of groans erupted around the table — mainly Thomas, Justine, and Franklin; Gina just looked pained and embarrassed. Ray's eyes widened.

Debi drew herself up in her seat, her expression turning petulant. "Well, thank you *so* much for the fashion advice, Ms. Sackcloth-and-Ashes..."

Valle cautioned, "Angelique, please, show some restraint. We have a new guest..."

Thomas lit a cigarette and laughed ruefully. "Yes, Mr. Bava," he said, "aren't you lucky to have found us?"

Ray's mouth opened a little in astonishment at the verbal firefight which seemed to have erupted around him, but it was hardly over.

Valle looked at his son and sighed. "Who was it who said, 'Ingratitude is the necessary curse of making things new'?"

Thomas glanced sharply at his father. "I'm supposed to be grateful?" he said, a bitter light shining in his eyes. "As in, 'Some day, all this will be mine'?" He looked around, as though to take in not just the room, but the entire constricted world in which he found himself. "My God," he said with mock enlightenment, "of course! This is *so* much better than owning a Fortune 500 company."

Valle's gaze was cold. "Thomas, you're making a fool of yourself."

"He's right, Thomas," Justine agreed. "Stop embarrassing me like this."

Thomas looked at her; looked at his father; and slowly rose. He tossed his napkin down on the table.

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"Fuck the both of you," he said. He turned and walked away, up the staircase and out of sight...

Ray, dumbfounded, glanced at Gina, in whose face he saw disgust, embarrassment, and — helplessness?

"My apologies, Mr. Bava, for my son's churlish behavior — "

Sister Angelique leaned in, her tone dripping with self-righteous piety: "At least Thomas acknowledges his greed, and envy," she said. "How many of you will so readily admit to your *own* sins?"

Justine and Debi responded with some choice vulgarities; Angelique's tone became shrill, less a sermon than a harangue: "Own *up* your sins! Only then can you find forgiveness. Let me help! How long has it been since we gathered in meditation — "

"Not long enough," snapped Justine.

"Quiet."

Valle's voice was suddenly the hard, blunt instrument of will which Ray had heard in his half-dream; less silken than steel. His guests — even Angelique — fell silent. His stony gaze tracked across them all, as he said, quietly, "Show some respect. Before the collapse, the good sister here was an inspiration to millions. A best-selling author. I think we could all benefit from her counsel."

The silence around the table was profound. No one was more stunned by this turn of events than Angelique herself, who stared cautiously at Valle, unsure how to proceed. Clearly this was not the usual reaction her diatribes evoked.

Valle turned to her, solicitously. "What exactly did you have in mind, Angelique? Some sort of...spiritual ceremony?"

A pleased little smile came to her, and for a moment, Ray thought he saw a faint reminder of the woman on the videotape.

"Yes," she said eagerly. "Exactly..."

"I think getting in touch with our spiritual sides would do us all a world of good," Valle declared. He glanced around the table, as though daring anyone to disagree. Unsurprisingly, no one did. Ray, who would not have been willing to bet a nickel that Valle *had* a spiritual side, much less desired to locate it, puzzled over this turn of events.

Valle turned back to Angelique. "What would you say to tomorrow afternoon at five? In the conservatory?"

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"I'll bring my prayer book," Justine muttered under her breath, but no other objections were noted.

The remainder of dinner went about as well. Ray tried to talk with Gina, but Justine, drinking heavily, practically threw herself bodily between the two of them — leaning in with sly jokes at every opportunity, boldly resting her hand on his leg, the curve of her long nails tracing small circles on the inside of his thigh. Gina left early, and soon thereafter Ray made his apologies as well, feigning exhaustion from his ordeal.

Back in his own room, lying shirtless on his bed, the gray light outside alleging neither day nor night, he was just drifting off to sleep when a knock on his door roused him. Answering it, he found Justine tottering in the doorway, still quite looped.

She held up her glass in a small toast. "'Let he who is without sin...make up for lost time.'"

Ray smiled thinly. "I, ah, think the good sister might be able to help you with your Bible study."

Justine laughed shortly, ambling uninvited into the room. "*Sister!* She's self-ordained, for God's sake — one of those Glory Age, cosmological bullshit cults. Give me a break."

Ray sighed. "Mrs. Valle...you do realize you're not entirely sober?"

She shrugged. "If you'd lived here for five years," she shot back, "would *you* be?"

Not a bad point. Justine smiled seductively; put down her glass. "Though I must admit — things *are* looking up..."

She looped her arms around his neck, leaned in to kiss him — but he pushed her away, gently. She looked both baffled and offended. "Why not?"

"Two reasons. You're drunk and you're married. And I doubt there are many divorce lawyers left alive."

She smiled crookedly. "See? Not such a bad world after all." Ray couldn't help but laugh. She shrugged. "Your loss."

Ray saw her out of the room...then looked up to find Gina, apparently headed for the staircase, staring at the two of them, first with surprise, then dismay — as she made an incorrect, if understandable, assumption. Ray's discomfiture must have been obvious — as obvious as his attraction to Gina — because Justine saw her opportunity to make a little mischief. Abruptly,

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she grabbed Ray and gave him a wet, passionate kiss, her tongue darting into his startled mouth. She tasted like gin.

Ray quickly pushed her away — but too late. He turned in time to see Gina hurrying down the staircase. "Gina!" he called out, but she picked up her pace; by the time he reached the stairwell, she was gone, and he had no idea which room here was hers. Damn it!

He turned back to the smirking Justine, his temper flaring.

"What the hell is wrong with you people?" he shouted at her. "You act like spoiled children — like caged animals! Is it the bacteria? Can't you remember what it means to be a civilized human being? Have you forgotten whatever kindness and decency you ever had?"

His words seemed to give her pause; she looked suddenly confused, disoriented. For an instant, something resembling shame and embarrassment flickered in her eyes—

And vanished just as quickly. The smirk returned to her face, and she laughed. "If I have," she said, "I'm better off for it." She turned and made her way unsteadily down the hall, disappearing around a corner.

Wanting suddenly to be anywhere but where he was, Ray shrugged on a shirt and started walking — wandering the Refuge, trying to make sense of all he'd seen and heard tonight. He descended the winding staircase, passed the exercise room, then paused at the hydroponics lab. Like all the common areas, it was open, and more importantly to Ray just now, it seemed peaceful. He drifted inside. The room was a potpourri of familiar smells: sweet fruit, orange blossoms, the rich odor of loam. He recalled most of them clearly, but wandering amid the beds of fruits and vegetables he had the occasional lapse: were cantaloupes always this soft, did roses come in shades of blue? Reflexively he picked a cherry tomato, took a bite; it tasted good, tart and sweet, but did it taste like a tomato? How could he know for sure?

Irritated, he turned to leave. The west wall was made entirely of glass, and now he happened to glance at it, expecting to see only darkness, and snow.

Someone was standing outside.

Ray started. At first he thought it might be another stranger — then realized it was Thomas. He was standing perhaps ten feet from the house, skipping stones into the distance, watching them spark and fall as they struck the particle field surrounding the mansion.

Thomas turned and, seeing Ray, motioned for him to join him. "It's all right," he called out, voice slightly muffled by the double-paned glass. "It's

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a sterile field inside here." He nodded toward a half-open door at the far end of the hydroponics lab; Ray shrugged to himself and walked through.

Outside, Thomas gestured toward the protective bubble of the particle field. "Pretty, isn't it?" he said, looking more relaxed than Ray had yet seen him. "Like one of those old snow globes, except all the snow is outside, not inside, the glass."

He handed Ray a small flat stone. "Feel free," he said.

Ray tossed the stone. It hit the field, hung suspended a moment amid a halo of sparks, then dropped to the ground, its inertia abruptly reduced to zero. Idly Ray wondered what happened to air molecules from outside; were they repelled, or somehow decontaminated?

Thomas nodded toward the dead forest in the distance. "This was all mangrove trees, once," he said, a hint of sadness in his voice. "My parents and I came here every winter until I was eighteen. There's a big chunk of tundra about two miles to the south, used to be a golf course. Disney World's about a hundred miles in that direction — looks like some medieval city now, ramparts covered in snow." He looked almost as though he could see it from here.

Ray studied him a moment, then said carefully, "Are you and your father usually that — "

"Ohhh, yes," Thomas said with a small laugh. He glanced at Ray even as he threw another stone; this one missed its mark by a good two feet. "We've been in competition with one another since the day I was born. Starting with my mother's affection, I suppose. I won that one — I don't think he's ever forgiven me that." He shrugged. "First and last one I did win. Stupidly, I keep trying to beat him on his own terms, and all I have to show for it are failed businesses and spectacularly bad investments." Tension crept back into his tone. "Moot point, now. Game over. Playing field's been razed. He may have lost his business empire, but his son's a failure, now and forever. Not a bad trade-off, eh?"

Ray tried to keep the dismay and pity from his voice. "Come on. Your life can't be *all* about that — "

Thomas considered that a long moment. "But it is," he said quietly. "Maybe it wasn't, once. But it is now." He snapped up a larger rock, sent it hurtling toward the barrier; the field crackled and arced like fireworks. "This damned bug," he said. "This bacteria. I feel — " He looked at Ray, his eyes

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angry and haunted at once. "I feel like there's *more* to me than this. More than just hunger. And envy. And anger. But I don't — "

He turned away. Stared out at the eternal storm. "Fuck it," he said softly. "Just fuck it."

And, with that, he turned, brushed past Ray as though he no longer existed, and returned to the house.

Shaken and confused, Ray followed. Christ — was this his future, as well? Would he eventually forget the best parts of himself, as these people seemed to have? Gina hadn't — at least she didn't appear to have — but who knew? Was survival worth it, to survive like this?

He ascended the staircase to the second floor. Preoccupied, he didn't notice till he had rounded a corner that Justine was walking just ahead of him. When he saw her he immediately backtracked, having no desire for a repeat performance. Hanging back around the corner, he heard a knock on a door, followed by the sound of the door opening. He waited a good thirty seconds, giving her time to enter, then came back round the corner once again.

He came to an abrupt halt.

Justine and Valle stood in front of an open doorway, kissing passionately, with no apparent thought for who might see them — Valle's hands first caressing the small of her back, then moving slowly down, cupping and squeezing her buttocks...

Before Ray could move, Valle suddenly looked up.

His gaze met Ray's. He smiled briefly, then brought his mouth down to his daughter-in-law's breasts.

Ray continued on his way, wordlessly passing them by, doing his best to ignore Justine's moans and the somehow disturbing sound of Valle's breath. Halfway to his room he heard a door snick shut behind him; heard faintly the sounds of their illicit laughter behind closed doors. He entered his room, shut the door, and started to lock it.

And only then discovered that, as with the common areas, there were apparently no locks on *any* of the doors in the Refuge.

At breakfast the next morning Ray tried to speak privately to Gina, but she ducked him, snapping up a bagel and orange juice on her way to the infirmary. When Ray suggested he might stop by later, she looked at him coolly: "Oh, I think you're fully recovered," she said. "You adapt quickly, Mr. Bava."

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As Gina left, Justine straggled in, last to arrive save for the absent Angelique. Debi shot Justine a chill look as she entered, but Thomas, already seated, barely looked up from his coffee as his wife sat beside him. "Lost our way last night, did we, darling?" he said acidly.

Justine smiled coldly, stabbed a piece of cantaloupe with her fork. "Oh, I knew *exactly* where I was, Thomas. But thank you for your concern."

Valle, across the table, made a great show of studying his son. "Thomas, you look tired. Are you getting enough sleep?"

"It was...fitful," Thomas said tightly.

Valle took a swallow of coffee, nodding with apparent sympathy. "Mm, I have that problem myself sometimes. Usually only when I sleep alone, though. Last night I slept like a baby." He glanced at his son's wife; smiled. "Justine, you look particularly lovely this morning..."

Justine returned the smile, with all its none-too-subtle implications; Thomas, looking about ready to pop a vein, concentrated very hard on buttering a scone. Nor did Debi seem her usually bubbly self. Ray's revulsion was now increasing geometrically with each passing minute.

"So," Justine said brightly, "where's our little tower of psychobabble today?"

"If by that you mean Angelique," Valle said, "I believe she's preparing for our spiritual ceremony this afternoon."

Debi, petulant, declared, "I'm not going."

Valle shot her a stern look. "You most certainly are."

"Why should I? She thinks I'm a whore, why should I care what she says?"

Valle shrugged. "Maybe you *are* a whore."

Silence sharp as glass. Debi's eyes went wide.

"Maybe we all are," Valle went on. "Maybe the good Sister can rid us of our pretensions otherwise."

Ray had had enough. He stood; tossed his napkin down, left his breakfast uneaten. "Excuse me."

As he walked out of the room, he heard Valle's voice, mock-innocent, behind him: "Was it something I said?"

Ray headed straight for the infirmary, where Gina was busying herself making a checklist of supplies and medicines. He stood in the doorway until she noticed him, then said calmly, "I didn't sleep with Justine. I'd rather sleep with something more warm-blooded, like a rattlesnake."

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Gina sighed. "Why do you care so much what *I* think?"

"Because," Ray said evenly, "you're the only person here — maybe the only person left in the world — I feel like I can respect. I'd like to have yours, too."

Her face softened. She smiled sadly. "Not exactly the family next door, are they?"

He took a step inside. "Not that I'm complaining, mind you, but...what are *you* doing in this group?"

She shrugged. "I worked for Valle. Still do, I suppose."

"Where? In one of his companies?"

She sighed, as if not quite certain of the answer herself. "I think so. There are gaps for me, like there are for you." She rubbed one arm as though suddenly cold. "Sometimes I think about my old life...about school; about my friends; even my family...and I wonder if it ever happened at all. If the sun ever really shone in the sky...if there really were such things as summers at the beach, or hot June nights, or warm spring rain..."

She blinked back tears. Ray put a hand gently on her shoulder. "There were," he said. "I remember them, too."

"Do you?" she said. She looked at him. "Ray...who *are* you? Do you even know?"

Struggling to articulate the confusion he felt, he said, "I — I feel kind of like a jigsaw puzzle that's still in the box. Lots of different pieces, but I don't know what they add up to." She laughed a little at that; he smiled and went on: "I seem to remember...moving around a lot. Job to job. City to city. Never quite putting down roots. But I don't know that for sure. All I know for certain — " He hesitated, then decided to say it: " — is what I'm feeling now. That's all I can trust, really."

She looked away, shyly, and changed the subject.

They talked, as best they could under Franklin's baleful eye, until it was time for Angelique's "spiritual ceremony," entering the conservatory together (a fact not lost on Justine, who threw them a dirty look). The other guests were all there, gathered in a handful of folding chairs; an impromptu pulpit was set up in front of the big bay windows looking out at the blizzard.

Moments after Ray and Gina sat down, Angelique entered. She was, surprisingly, wearing a more stylish, lavender dress, and she carried herself with what Ray could only think to call a *careful* dignity — as though she were

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walking on eggshells. She smiled at her tiny congregation; looked at them not fiercely, but with a certain gentleness. "Thank you," she said softly. "For coming today..."

Having seen the videotape of her early sermon, Ray could see, with heartbreaking clarity, how hard she was trying to recapture some echo of the woman she once was. She cleared her throat; glanced down at her notes; then smiled and said, a bit shakily, "Miracles...*do* happen. They...they live in your heart — "

"Sister?" came a voice from behind Ray. Valle's voice. Ray's stomach immediately knotted up.

Angelique looked up; startled. "I...yes?"

"Would *this* be a miracle?" Valle said soberly.

Angelique looked confused. "'This'?"

"Our being here. Alive. When so many others are not. Is this a miracle?"

"In a...way, I suppose. But — "

"So all those others who died," Valle said, "they didn't *deserve* a miracle?"

Angelique was not prepared for this. Ray could see her groping, mentally, to recapture her rhythm: "Whenever you do an...act of kindness for another person," she said, falling back on rote to carry her through, "it's a...a miracle..."

But by now the others had realized what Valle was up to, and knew that they had leave to follow suit: "Oh," Thomas piped up, "like my father letting you in here, you mean?"

"Oh, yes," Justine said. "Hallelujah for *that.*"

Ray and Gina exchanged queasy looks as Angelique struggled to regain control of the meeting. "Please...let me finish — "

"Now, now," Valle said to Thomas, "I could hardly have done anything else. The poor woman had nowhere else to turn — "

Debi, seeing her opportunity for revenge, leaned forward, voice sharp as a blade: "Because her husband, the Congressman, took somebody *else* into the government shelters!"

Ray flinched. Angelique looked as though she'd been physically struck. "*No,*" she said, the word an exhalation as much as a denial, "that's not — "

"Was she young?" Debi taunted. "Did *she* dress like a whore, too?"

"Stop it!" Ray shouted. "You have no right — "

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Angelique, eyes tightly shut, was blocking it all out, reciting the familiar words like a rosary: "Every...time...you throw a little light...into a darkened room — "

Thomas jumped to his feet, as though at a revivalist meeting. "It's a *miracle!*" he cried out. *"Praise the Lord!"*

Thomas, Justine, Debi, and Franklin laughed delightedly; Valle just smiled a reptilian smile, clearly relishing this. Ray and Gina were on their feet and rushing toward Angelique, who finally broke down into sobs, holding tightly onto the podium as though it were the last remnant of some distant, cherished world...

Ray reached her side first; he put an arm around her shoulders. "It's okay...come on...come with me..."

Valle was not pleased. "Mr. Bava," he said coldly, "the service isn't over yet."

Ray glanced up at him. "I think it is."

Angelique buried her face in Ray's shoulder and sobbed uncontrollably; he and Gina slowly led her through the makeshift nave toward the nearest exit. Valle was quietly furious; as Ray passed him, the older man stared venomously at him, and Ray did his best to reciprocate.

They took Angelique to the infirmary, where Ray watched as Gina put the shaken woman to bed, then handed her a couple of pills and a cup of water. "Here," she said. "This'll help you sleep."

Angelique stared at the pills in her hand a long moment, her eyes glassy. "Should've taken these...when he left me," she said softly...

Gina put a hand gently on her arm. "Don't say that." Angelique swallowed the pills dry, closed her eyes. Gina waited patiently until she drifted off to sleep, then quietly retreated with Ray to the anteroom.

Shutting the door behind them, Gina said, "I know what you're thinking. But there's nowhere to run."

"Valle said there were other enclaves — other refuges — "

Gina shook her head. "Just rumors. Sometimes I think he makes them up, just to tease us, give us false hope. But even if there were another enclave, and we knew where it was — how would we even *get* to it? On foot, across hundreds, maybe thousands of miles?" Her voice broke; she looked down. "No," she said softly. "There *are* no other refuges. Not for us."

Ray reached out, put her chin tenderly in his palm, gently forced her to look up at him.

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"There is one," he said.

AS THEY MADE LOVE, in the warmth and darkness of his room, it was possible, for a moment, to believe that they were in another place and time entirely; that the snow swirling in the dark well of the windows was a passing winter storm; that they would wake to a light dusting of powder on the front lawn, and a bright, thawing sun in the sky. It was possible, just for a moment, to believe in seasons.

The woman's cry put an end to all that.

"*Thomas!* For God's sake!" Justine's voice, filled with uncharacteristic terror. Ray and Gina scrambled out of bed, threw on some robes, and raced toward the sound of Justine's voice, echoing from Valle's room: "*Jesus*, Tom, no!"

They rushed through Valle's door, through the sitting room to the palatial bedroom suite in the rear — to find Thomas Valle, disheveled, wild-eyed, and more than a little drunk, standing five feet from the bed in which his father and his wife lay naked. He was pointing a .45 automatic at Justine, who was backed up against the headboard of the bed, her usual silky composure now considerably frayed. Valle, sitting beside her, partially covered by satin sheets, was much more composed; in fact, he showed no signs of fear whatsoever.

Ray and Gina froze in the doorway.

Thomas gave them only a moment's notice. "That's as close as you come," he warned, the gun waggling dangerously in his hand.

Ray made no threatening movements, even as he tried to figure out how he might be able to disarm Thomas without putting anyone else at risk. Thomas's attentions returned to his wife.

"Bitch," he said, practically spitting out the word. "How long have you been doing it? Since the beginning? Since we moved in here?" When Justine didn't reply, he raised the gun and pointed it directly at her head, his whole arm trembling. "*Answer* me, damn it!"

"Actually," Valle replied, cool and calm, "it was well before we moved in here. Isn't that right, Justine?"

Justine looked at him as though he'd taken leave of his senses. For an instant, Ray saw in Thomas' eyes a shock of betrayal greater than anything

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the son had expected — anything he had ever wanted to hear — and then the shock turned to acceptance, and the acceptance to rage...

But Valle just said, calmly, "Stop pointing that thing at your wife, Thomas. It's *me* you really want to point it at, isn't it?" He smiled. "Go on. Go ahead."

Thomas held the gun steady a long moment...then, slowly, moved its muzzle a few inches to the left...until he was aiming it directly at his father's heart.

"You son of a bitch," he said. "I should've done this years ago. When you put Mother in the hospital, the first time."

Valle laughed. "You didn't have the nerve. You still don't."

"And what do you call this?"

"I call it bravado. It usually goes hand in hand with failure."

"Shut up!"

But Valle did not let up. "You've been a failure, a coward, all your life; you're not about to change now."

Ray snapped, "Valle, for God's sake — "

"Jesus Christ," Thomas yelled, "don't make me do this!"

Valle smiled. "Feel your finger on the trigger, Thomas? Feel the tension there? That's power. That's what you've been afraid of, all your life. You've disdained it, rejected it, run from it. What are you going to do, now that you have it? Run away again? Or embrace it?"

Thomas's hand suddenly stopped trembling.

He raised the gun; aiming between his father's eyes.

"Bastard," he whispered.

A shot rang out...but not from Thomas's gun.

Ray watched in horror as blood pooled inside Thomas's shirt, beginning as a bubble the size of a quarter and quickly expanding to cover his entire chest — like Poe's red death, come to claim him.

Ray spun to face Valle. There was a smoking hole in the satin sheets covering Valle's arm; now he tossed them aside, revealing the pistol in his right hand...

Thomas collapsed, the weight of the blood seeming almost to drag him down, and lost consciousness.

Ray lunged at Valle, making a grab for his gun. They grappled for it, the pistol discharging once — harmlessly, thank God, into the air — before Ray,

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pounding the flat of his hand repeatedly on Valle's wrist, managed to loosen his grip on the weapon. They rolled off the bed, each wrestling for an advantage. Valle grabbed Ray by the neck and began squeezing murderously, his strength surprising for a man his age. Ray jabbed his two middle fingers into Valle's throat, the soft tissue near the larynx; Valle cried out and let go of Ray's neck. Ray grabbed Valle's arms and succeeded in pinning him to the floor. Ray kept his arms stiff, unyielding, braced for a doubtlessly powerful counterattack—

But Valle suddenly yielded; his body went limp, he made no further resistance. He looked up at Ray and grinned wolfishly.

It was, all at once, very bright in the room. Light seemed almost to be shining *through* Valle's face.

And Ray felt cold. As cold as the storm; as cold as he'd felt falling into the snowdrift.

He let go of Valle. The entire room was filled with blinding light; Gina's form was a white outline on a white background, slowly fading. Ray called out to her, but his own voice sounded impossibly faint.

In moments, there was no room, no house, no Gina or Valle or poor dying Thomas; only oblivion.

And then, just as suddenly, he was back in the dining room.

A fire burned in the hearth; a hearty breakfast was laid out on the table. The room was warm, and, except for Ray, empty. He was seated, fully clothed, at the table...with no idea how he had gotten here, or even gotten dressed. What the hell was happening? Where was Valle? And Gina? And —

"You look like a man with a problem," came a voice off to his right. Ray turned to find Franklin, nattily dressed in blazer and slacks, standing a few feet away, opening a bottle of wine.

But it was a radically different Franklin who inserted the corkscrew and gave it a sharp twist: no longer a nervous wisp of a man in his fifties — but a handsome young hunk in his *thirties*. And there was something else, too: something unpleasant in the curl of his mouth, something narrow and guarded about his eyes...

"There's very little, in my experience," he said, popping the cork, "that can't be cured with a drink." He poured a splash of chablis into Ray's water glass. "Mélinots, 1997. My father does have excellent taste in wine..."

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Father? Ray stared at him in disbelief. "Doctor...what the hell's going on?"

Franklin laughed. "'Doctor'? Hell, I barely got my B.A." He glanced to his right. "Here comes the only doctor in *this* house..."

Ray looked up.

Thomas entered the room. Hale. Hearty. Without so much as a powder burn on him.

And twenty years older.

Face deeply lined, eyes bagged, he walked with the nervous, hesitant shuffle of an even older man. *Franklin*'s walk. He saw Ray, threw him a cold look, just the way Franklin always had, and sat down at the table.

"Dr. Dreeden," Franklin said. "Some wine?"

"At this hour? I think not." Even his voice was different: still Thomas's voice, but thinner, reedy, drained of even the dark vitality of Thomas's anger; he sounded tired, resigned.

Things got even stranger.

Justine descended the staircase — wearing Gina's white nurse's uniform. Her hair now fell to her shoulders, softening her face somehow, and even her eyes no longer seemed hard and glittery, but warm and open.

She smiled when she saw Ray. "Mr. Bava," and her voice was warm as well, "how are you feeling?"

Ray, completely disoriented, managed to stammer out, "Actually, I — think I may be taking a turn for the worse..."

Justine looked genuinely concerned. "I'm sorry to hear that. Perhaps you should come down to the infirmary, after breakfast — "

And now Debi entered the room. Debi, whose honey-blonde hair was now done up in a French twist. Who was wearing one of Justine's chic gowns, and Justine's diamond jewelry. Who walked to the table with Justine's slow, languorous stride...

Franklin barely looked up at her as she sat beside him. "Lost our way last night, did we, darling?" he said acidly.

Debi stabbed a piece of cantaloupe with her fork. "Oh, I knew *exactly* where I was, Franklin. But thank you for your concern..."

Ray's head was spinning. It was all the same; and yet it was all different. What the hell was going on? Another side-effect of the bacterial infection? But that hardly explained Thomas, his miraculous recovery from the bullet wound —

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"Morning, all."

Valle entered the room, unchanged as far as Ray could tell; but on his arm now was — Angelique. An Angelique with teased hair, wearing a tight minidress, hips swaying as she sashayed in on stiletto heels. Valle caught Ray staring at her; he smiled that wolfish smile again. "Mr. Bava. You remember my fiancée — Angelique?"

Angelique giggled. "Call me Angel."

"And of course," Valle went on, "you know the good sister."

Ray was suddenly afraid. He knew who this had to be.

He looked up — as Gina descended the staircase. She was wearing the gray, shroud-like dress, but that was the least of the changes that had been wrought in her: her face, once open and accessible, was now hard and closed, and her eyes now smoldered with barely contained rage and paranoia...

Gina sat down opposite Angelique and declared, "You dress like a whore."

As before, groans and insults flew across the table. Ray's heart was pounding; seeing Gina like this, twisted, corrupted, to baffling purpose, filled him with helpless rage.

"The only way to rid yourselves of sin is to own *up* to it," Gina cried, shrill as Angelique had ever been. "Let me *help* you — "

"Perhaps the good sister has a point," Valle said. Was it Ray's imagination, or was he looking at Ray, was there a secret edge to his voice meant just for him? "I think we could all benefit from her counsel. Perhaps some sort of...spiritual ceremony — "

"*No!*" Ray shouted, a reflex. He jumped to his feet, spilling his drink in the process.

"Mr. Bava, what's wrong?" Valle's knowing smile belied his question.

He was not about to let Valle do it again; not to Gina. He went to her side; took her hand. "Gina, come with — "

But Gina yanked back her hand, eyes burning with indignation. "How *dare* you!" she snapped at him.

"Gina, please — "

"Don't touch me!"

Debi smiled sardonically. "Yes, Ray, didn't you know? She's the bloody Virgin Mary — unless your sex is absolutely *immaculate*, she's not interested."

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"Blasphemer!" Gina shouted. Her wild eyes tracked from one guest to the other. "All of you, you *wallow* in evil, you *bask* in your own wickedness!"

All save Justine and Ray were rocking with laughter. "Now I ask you," Debi addressed the air, "with entertainment like this, who misses television?"

His heart aching for Gina, for what she'd become, Ray reached out to touch her. "Gina — "

She threw off his hand; her tone was ferocious. *"Keep away from me!"* She ran as though the devil itself were at her heels, pounding up the staircase to the laughter and applause of the others.

Ray watched her go, overwhelmed with horror, sadness, loss...and an ever-increasing rage.

"Frankly," Debi said, mock-confidential, "I think Our Lady of Perpetual Abstinence could *really* benefit from getting her sackcloth-and-ashes hauled..."

Ray turned angrily to Valle.

Valle looked at him and smiled.

A memory suddenly broke the surface of Ray's mind, as though long suppressed and just now being made conscious: He had a sudden, jolting image of himself hitting someone, pounding away at their flesh without hesitation or guilt or emotion of any kind.

Valle's gaze was calm; steady.

Ray found himself overwhelmed by the memories that now came flooding back to him:

Ray, deliberately and methodically breaking someone's arm; he heard the snap of bone as clearly as if it were taking place in this very room. It meant no more to him than if he were snapping a pencil in two.

Ray, barely wrinkling his gray three-piece suit, tossing a man to the floor of Valle's office, then kicking him in the stomach, as Valle nodded approvingly.

Ray, feeling a rush of pride and pleasure at Valle's approval.

No, he told himself. *It's not true!* Valle was doing this. Trying to turn him into something he wasn't. He looked up to face him.

Valle grinned wolfishly at him.

Ray's anger evaporated. Suddenly, all he felt for Valle...was admiration. The admiration of one predator for another. He felt a grin, Valle's grin, spread

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across his own face, like a snake under his skin, cold and venomous and welcome. Suddenly, all he wanted from life was Valle's approval; his cold benediction.

"Ray," Valle said casually, "I've just learned that my son is planning to murder me. Restrain him, would you?"

Franklin went white. He stood shakily. "What the hell — "

Ray was upon him before he could move from the table, grabbing him viciously by the collar, half-lifting Franklin off his feet. Ray didn't think about his sudden strength other than to enjoy it. *Power at rest is pointless,* a voice inside him said. *Power exercised is pleasure.* Ray laughed, eager to exercise his power.

Franklin's face was pallid. "Please," and his voice was trembling, afraid, "please don't — "

Instead of scorn, Ray felt a twinge of pity; of empathy. He fought it; tried to ignore it. Valle would be ashamed of him for feeling it, Valle would never approve —

But it wouldn't go away. He stared into Franklin's terrified eyes...and slowly, his mind began to clear.

The false memories shattered like stale candy—brittle, and bitter to the taste.

Ray let go of Franklin. He turned to Valle, feeling no admiration, only anger—even more so than before, now that he had had a taste of the violation the others were experiencing. "You son of a bitch," he said.

Valle seemed surprised, and not a little fascinated. Franklin too was startled by Ray's turnaround — and relieved. Debi looked vaguely disappointed.

Valle stood. "I think, Mr. Bava," he said, "we need to talk." He smiled at the other guests. "Excuse us, won't you?"

They found privacy in the conservatory, alone but for the storm just beyond the glass. Valle lit a cigar; studied Ray closely. "I must admit, I am intrigued. None of the others have been able to resist my—'alterations.' Why you?"

"You tell me. This 'infection' — did you create it? Are you using it, somehow? How the hell are you *doing* this?"

Valle shrugged. "Let's just say I can, and let it go at that."

After a moment, Ray said, "Fine. Keep your little secrets. Just change Gina back to what she was. Her true personality."

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Valle laughed. "And what makes you so sure that *was* her true personality? Maybe you fell in love with a facade — a mask — that *I* created. Maybe your beloved Gina is really as cold and conniving as my son's wife."

"I don't believe that."

"But you don't know for sure, do you? You don't know *anything* for sure."

Ray seethed, knowing he was right. Valle's tone hardened further. "I don't know why you won't bend to my will, Mr. Bava. But the reality — the only reality that matters to you — is that I am the master of this house. And if you're going to remain here, you're going to have to play by the house rules."

"If that means standing by and watch you jerk these people around like puppets," Ray snapped, "you can forget it."

Valle considered a moment. "In that case," he said evenly, "downstairs, next to the hydroponics lab, you'll find a storage cabinet. Inside are several heat-generating parkas, goggles, a medical kit, rations, an electronic navigation device — even a gun. Feel free to take any — and everything you might need."

"You're tossing me out?"

"I'm giving you the option of leaving. If the sight of my manipulations so offends you, you can look for another refuge. Though I doubt seriously you'll find one." His sly smile hinted at some knowledge Ray could only guess at. "You'll find the airlock on the south lawn; once inside, follow the instructions on the wall. The access door will close behind you, the particle field will be neutralized at the point of exit, then reactivate thirty seconds later. If you decide to return, you may — but only on *my* terms."

He smiled and left the conservatory. Ray looked after, not doubting for a moment that he was serious, then glanced out at the unforgiving storm. For a moment he could feel it again — the chilly embrace of a spurned lover, come to reclaim him — but even so, it didn't take him long to come to his decision.

He found Gina in the upstairs library, kneeling in prayer; though her eyes were closed in what should have been repose, Ray could read the torture in her face, the pain and sorrow of abandonment, loss of love and loss of faith. All of it false. All of it imprinted on her, somehow, by Valle, her true past a palimpsest beneath this lie of memory.

He stood in the doorway; cleared his throat.

She turned. Alarm in her eyes as she saw him.

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"Excuse me, sister." Gently; as gently as he could manage. Her body was tensed, as though braced for an attack. "I just wanted to apologize. For my behavior earlier. It was...inappropriate."

The tension in her body eased a bit, but she still regarded him warily. "Well, I...I've never felt you to be a man of evil intent, Mr. Bava," she said quietly.

"I'm not."

She nodded. Looked at him approvingly, as at a penitent seeking absolution. "If God can forgive our indiscretions," she said, dripping with piety, "so can I. Your apology is accepted."

She looked so broken; so trusting. He hoped he would not someday have to pay real penance for what he was about to do.

"Thank you," Ray said. He reached into his pocket.

"I just hope God is equally understanding of this."

He pulled out the automatic pistol from the storage cabinet and trained it at her. Terrified, Gina took a step back, accidentally toppling over a small table.

"No one's going to hurt you," he promised. "But I do need you to come with me."

INCREDIBLY, HE COULD FEEL the bitter cold of the storm even through the thermal field generated by the parka. The field did melt the frozen rain — turning the icy needles to wet slush before they struck his face — but nothing, it seemed, could mitigate that raw, chafing wind that cut through their insulation like a knife. It would have been far worse without the parkas, but even with them the chill penetrated to their very bones.

"Sister" Gina waded through the snowdrifts a few steps ahead of him, less accustomed to the cold than he was, probably feeling it even more sharply. He felt, not for the first time in the last half hour, a stab of guilt — but he knew he had to try this. If the source of Valle's power was his house, then perhaps the farther they got from it, the less his influence on Gina. If not — well, there was a navigational beacon in the supply kit; they could always go back.

And then what? he asked himself. Spend the rest of their lives at Valle's mercy? Pawns in Valle's mind games? And how long before Valle succeeded

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in controlling him the way he already controlled the others — before he truly became Valle's ruthless, remorseless acolyte? Unless he was lucky, and had time to use the gun on himself, before it happened?

Gina abruptly stumbled, and with a small cry, fell into a snowdrift. Ray could see, behind her goggles, tears welling up in her eyes. "Please — I have to stop — rest — "

He hated this; hated the fear in her eyes when she glanced at him, when once she had looked at him with the first traces of love. "All right," he said. He probably shouldn't, but he couldn't stand to see the fear turn to hatred when he said no. "Just for a few minutes."

He burrowed into the side of the snowdrift, gouging out a small dimple in the snow to act as a makeshift windbreak. As they settled into it, Ray took out a thermos. "Would you like some coffee?"

She nodded. He unscrewed the thermos, poured her some steaming coffee. She took a sip, then closed her eyes. "Dear God," she whispered. "I've never been so cold in my life." She opened her eyes; looked at him imploringly. "Please take me back."

Ray wanted to reach out and touch her — reassure her he wouldn't let any harm come to her — but knew he didn't dare. "Not yet," he could only say. "I'm sorry."

She looked away; took another swallow of coffee.

"Feeling better?" he asked hopefully.

She nodded slowly. "A little." She looked up into the blank sky mottled with gray clouds. "No sun," she said quietly. "Never any sun." She shook her head. "Sometimes I wonder if it ever really shone at all...it's been so long, I wonder — "

Suddenly excited, Ray finished her thought for her:

"If there really was such a thing as summers at the beach," he said, "or hot June nights, or...warm spring rain..."

She looked at him, startled. "How did you know that?"

He worked up his nerve and took her gloved hands in his. She flinched at first, but he wouldn't let go. He looked into her eyes. "Gina — *look* at me. Try to remember. We were just starting to mean something to one another. Can you feel that? Can you feel anything of that, when you look at me?"

Gina stared at him, searchingly. At first her expression was as clouded, as sunless, as the sky above...then, slowly, a dim sort of light appeared in her eyes.

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Remembering, if not understanding, she said, "There...is no other refuge..."

Ray's heart leaped.

"There is one," he said quietly.

He leaned in and kissed her. Gently; briefly; tenderly. She didn't quite return it, but didn't resist either; and as he drew back, her eyes widened with dawning recognition.

"Ray...?" she said softly.

She *saw* him; she *knew* him. "Jesus!" he said, laughing. "*Gina* — "

And then everything went white.

At first he thought it was the storm — snow obscuring his vision. Too late, he recognized it as the same blinding light which had claimed him in Valle's bedroom. "*Gina!*" he shouted, now as then, but she was gone, and *he* was gone, drifting in some too-bright limbo —

And then he was back in the Refuge.

Seated in the same dining room chair he had found himself in earlier — as Valle's mocking laughter filled the room.

Ray jumped up. Valle stood just a few feet away, enjoying himself hugely. "Moving! Tremendously moving. I'm a better dramatist than I ever suspected."

"You bastard, I got through to her!"

"I *allowed* you to get through to her," Valle said, hard. "There's nothing here I don't control, Bava. *Nothing.* You want proof?"

Valle outstretched his hand.

A woman came up from behind Ray; a woman, seen from behind, with teased hair, poured into a tight minidress, hips swaying as she sashayed on stiletto heels to Valle's side. At first Ray thought it was Debi, or Angelique — then realized, a second later, that her hair was not blonde, or auburn, but brown...

She turned around, a vacuous smile on her face.

Valle grinned. "Ray: Have you met my fiancée — Gina?"

Gina looped an arm through Valle's — and giggled. "That's Gina with a 'G.'"

Ray stared at the woman he loved, twisted and corrupted yet again...and lost control. With an inchoate cry of rage, he lunged at Valle, knowing he might well murder him, not caring if he did.

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But after only a few steps, Ray's cry turned from one of rage to...pain. His head exploded in agony; worse than a dozen migraines, a cold fire that seemed to consume everything behind his eyes. His hands went reflexively to his head. He lost his balance and fell to his knees.

Through a red fog of pain he looked up at Valle. "God *damn* it! What are you *doing* to me?"

But through that fog, he could see that Valle, for once, was as surprised — and baffled — as Ray himself.

This time, the blinding white light did not come.

This time, there was only darkness. Darkness and pain.

And then, as if from a distance but drawing closer with each word, voices:

— *BP one-ten over seventy* —

— *pulse sixty beats per minute and climbing* —

— *respiration normalizing* —

Ray woke to cold. But not the cold of the storm.

He was naked; he could tell that immediately. Cool air brushed his legs, torso, face.

He opened his eyes.

His life returned in a rush.

His name was Raymond Bava. Born in Detroit, Michigan; moved to Chicago when he was five. Parents, Salvatore and Donna Bava; one sister, Lorraine; one brother, Joseph...

He looked down at himself. He was lying, naked, on a gurney. Electrodes pasted to his chest, neck, virtually every part of him. A plastic safety strap cut across his mid-section, securing him to the gurney.

Graduated Northwestern University, class of '22, B.A. in journalism. Two years, *Chicago Sun-Times* online edition; year and a half, WABC radio, New York City; three years, *Global Online News*, Boston bureau, assignments editor...

A woman in a white med-tech uniform smiled down at him, her voice calm and reassuring. "It's all right, Mr. Bava. We've found a cure, you're going to be fine." She glanced up at another, male, med-tech. "His BP's stabilizing; I think we can move him now."

He remembered it, now; all of it. Remembered how his work had suffered first, the difficulty in concentrating, followed by loss of motivation — a complete lack of desire to work. Then, even more frightening, the gradual

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aphasia, the inability to recognize words — and words had been at the heart of his life. Finally, the diagnosis: a glioma — a tumor the size of a golf ball on one of his frontal lobes — malignant, growing, and encroaching so thoroughly on vascular tissue that surgical removal was impossible, even by liquefaction or laser...

The gurney hummed along on its magnetic treads, and in the midst of this metal room, Ray caught a glint of light on glass. Chafing against the safety strap, Ray turned his neck to get a better look.

He saw exactly what he expected to see: a glass tube, seven feet high by three feet in diameter, its interior partially frosted over with ice crystals. Beside it, computer screens displayed sluggish, almost nonexistent EKG and EEG patterns, but Ray barely noticed them; he was looking at what was inside the glass tube.

It was a man's body — naked, presumably, though there was so much frost inside the glass that much of him was merely a pink blur. The face, however — that was quite distinct. A face in calm repose, its eyes closed.

Valle's face.

As soon as he recognized it, the gurney had passed it; moved on to another tube, another body, another face.

A woman's face. Beautiful, serene — at least on the outside.

Angelique.

One by one they appeared, ghosts made flesh: Thomas. Debi. Franklin. Justine...

Gina.

Suddenly his last memory of her — happily perverted into Valle's personal sex toy — came back in vivid, horrifying detail. He saw her arm loop eagerly through Valle's, and Ray struggled to talk, to make his long-unused voice work; a dry rasp sounding vaguely like the word *stop* was all he could force out.

The female med-tech smiled at him, assured him again that everything would be all right — and pressed a hypo against his shoulder. He felt the cold kiss of metal, a sharp jab, the familiar entry of a nanochip into his bloodstream...and as the chip began manufacturing precisely the amount of anesthesia that would be necessary for surgery, Ray's newly returned life and memory slipped away from him, into darkness once more. For a while.

* * *

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He had been in cold sleep less than two years.

The reconstructive technology necessary to save the veins encroached on by the lesion had almost been perfected when he entered suspension. He had known that; had been told it would probably be sooner rather than later that he would be awakened. He was lucky, he knew — some of these poor bastards had been in here for decades, would be here for decades still.

He didn't feel lucky.

As soon as he was able to speak again, to put two words together coherently, he began telling anyone who would listen that there was something wrong with the cryonics equipment. He told them about Valle; about the nightmare landscape in which Ray and the other sleepers found themselves; about Valle's manipulation of that nightmare, and of the others.

He was told he'd been dreaming. That not only did people dream in cold sleep, they *needed* to dream, for long-term psychological health, and so biofeedback regulators were used to release serotonin into the bloodstream, and trigger REM sleep.

He told them that it was more than a dream: that the sleepers were linked, maybe by the same biofeedback devices that altered their brainwave patterns to induce dreaming.

They assured him that wasn't possible.

I can tell you their damn names! he yelled, merely confirming their belief that he was in a hyper-delusional state of some kind. Franklin Dreeden, Thomas Valle, Justine Valle—

Thomas *Lindley*, they corrected him. Justine *Lyons*. That threw him; it hadn't occurred to him, though it should have, that Thomas was not really Valle's son, nor Justine his daughter-in-law. They pointed out to him that the sleepers' chambers were each labeled; obviously he saw their names before he himself entered suspension, garbling them in his dream.

They told him that people often said the dreams they had in cold sleep were more vivid than any they had ever known — despite the fact that the dream-process was slowed down as much as their physical body-functions. And even if what Ray suggested *was* possible — why, they countered, would one person be able to control this common dream?

After a day or so of paging through reference data on dreams via the WorldNet, Ray came back with a theory: Maybe Valle *knew* that he was dreaming. "Lucid dreaming," it was called — the ability to control a dream

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by "waking up" to the fact that you were *in* one. Because Valle knew that — and the others didn't — he was able to wipe out their memories (as he couldn't do to Ray because of the lesion in his brain?) and impose *new* personae, new pasts, on their sleeping psyches.

His doctors exchanged worried looks and began talking about "cryonically-induced delusional systems."

Just wake *one* of them up, dammit! Ray implored. Just long enough to find out for yourselves!

He was told, quite firmly, that that was out of the question. It took a full day to bring a person out of cold sleep, and as their body functions accelerated, so too did their diseases. Without a cure waiting — the doctors simply couldn't take that risk.

They assigned him a psychological counselor, as they did all sleepers, to ease the transition back into society. After a week of sojourns into the waking world, the dream no longer seemed quite as palpable; even Gina's face became indistinct, difficult to evoke.

Eventually, he began to wonder if it had been just a delusion, after all.

He was discharged not long after.

His attorneys had capably managed his living trust in the two years he'd been asleep; his stock portfolio and savings had increased by almost forty percent in that time — tax-deferred, under the law, for anyone in cold sleep. Ray left the cryonics facility in Maryland, took the maglev train to Boston, found an apartment in a building only two blocks from his old one on Beacon Street, and went to check his belongings out of storage.

Not that there was much in the way of belongings. A computer; a closet-full of clothes; about a thousand cyberbooks, and at least as many paper ones; all of it carried from one city to another, one furnished apartment to another, over the past fifteen years. Looking at them now, occupying a ten by fifteen foot storage space in Watertown, he winced at this meager encapsulation of a life. There'd been relationships, of course — he was no monk — each inevitably ended by a new job, a new town. He'd never put down roots; never wanted to, really.

And now he did. Despite everything, despite his uncertainty about whether it had even happened at all...he found himself wanting to put down roots...in a dream.

He should have been out looking for work; making some attempt at jump-starting his life. Instead he found himself plugged into the WorldNet,

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trawling for data. Using skills better used to support himself to chase a ghost. Or, more accurately, to exorcise one: to demonstrate to himself that the woman in his dream had no correlation to the real woman who had entered cold sleep at Westland Cryonics. To get on with his life.

All he knew was her name. Everything else, the details of her life, her family history, was probably fabrication — his own, or (if this was real) Valle's. But just for the hell of it, he accessed the latest edition of *Who's Who in American Medicine,* initiated a search request, and entered her name.

To his surprise, within moments an entry flashed onto the screen:

BEAUMONT, GINA FRANCES, immunologist; b. Harrisburg, Pa., Nov 2, 2003; d.o. William Charles and Eve (Madison) Beaumont. B.Sc., LaSalle College, Pa., 2024. M.D., Harvard Medical School, 2028. Intern, resident, Presbyn. Hosp., Pa., 2028-2030...

Good God, he thought; a doctor? What were the odds of his dreaming her to be in the medical profession, even as a nurse? Fueled by a sudden rush of hope, he accessed the Harrisburg, Pennsylvania phone book and ran a search for *Beaumont, William James,* or *Beaumont, Eve.* It came up zero. He widened the search to all of Pennsylvania; still nothing. New Jersey, New York, also zip. He realized how futile this probably was; their number could be unpublished for all he knew.

He thought a moment and tried another tack. He went back to *Who's Who in American Medicine,* this time entering her parents' names. After a moment, he was rewarded with:

BEAUMONT, WILLIAM J(AMES), endocrinologist; b. Hartford, Ct., July 3, 1973, m. Eve Madison Feb 2, 1998, d. Gina Frances Nov 2, 2003, s. Louis James b. Dec 1, 2005...

Excitedly he printed out the entry, including the information that Dr. Beaumont was currently a research fellow at New York Hospital. He called, left word with Dr. Beaumont's receptionist, then went back online and continued searching, all the while waiting anxiously until, two hours later, the phone rang.

"This is Dr. Beaumont," came a pleasant voice on the other end. "How can I help you?"

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Ray took a breath and, summoning his best professional tone, reeled off his credentials. He said (his voice only slightly shaking) that he needed some information on Beaumont's daughter, Gina, for a piece he was writing. He didn't elaborate; either the man would inquire further, or make an assumption.

He made an assumption. "Is this about her work in Thailand?" Beaumont asked.

"Exactly," Ray said. "When did your daughter first go to Thailand?"

There was a weariness, but also a certain pride in Beaumont's voice: "Just after the first outbreak there of the Osaka virus," he said. "She was an immunologist, and she believed a certain combination of anti-viral medications might boost the immune system of Osaka victims. How much do you know about the virus, Mr. Bava?"

"Only that it's invariably fatal," Ray said, truthfully, "and that even after ten years, it's barely been contained in Asia."

"I don't claim my daughter was" — he caught himself — "*is* a complete altruist; a plaster saint. I think her dedication to her work was composed of equal parts compassion and pure stubbornness — a refusal to admit defeat. But it's true she was moved by the plight of the victims, and stayed on longer than her research really required. Eventually, as you know, she contracted the virus herself.

"Even then, she didn't return to the States until she was informed in no uncertain terms — by me, actually — that if she didn't enter cold sleep immediately, the damage to her body would be too extensive for any hope of revival. I think she felt guilty, frankly, for leaving; she had the money, she *could* go into suspension. But every day she saw hundreds of people who didn't have that option, and it pained her."

The pain in Beaumont's voice was equally clear. Ray said, quietly, "You must be very proud of her," and Beaumont's voice cracked a little when he said "Yes." They spoke a little more about Gina's childhood, funny stories only a father would know, and at the end, when Beaumont asked him when the article would appear and Ray had to fudge a date, Ray felt a flash of guilt at the ruse, and smoothly brought the interview to an end.

But his guilt was far eclipsed by his elation. *This* was the Gina he knew! True, none of the details of her real life corresponded to those "invented" for her by Valle — but the essence of her personality, her courage and her

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character...that was the same. The woman who went to Thailand was the same woman who had defied Valle, who had put herself at risk to save Ray's life; he had no doubt of that.

It had all been real. He was certain of that now.

And he had to save her from Valle's manipulations.

He spent the better part of a week trawling the WorldNet for data on the other sleepers, not all of it as easy to come by as that for Gina. He spoke with Thomas's wife; exchanged e-mail with Debi's parents; had a brief consultation with Franklin's doctor. He accessed everything he could find on Valle, in fact as well as in dream the owner of a successful bioengineering company. He even had a short conversation with the cryonically "widowed" Moira Valle, who did not sound in any way upset that her husband of thirty years — thirty *long* years, from the tone of her voice — was currently on ice, courtesy an extensively metastasized cancer of the lymph glands.

When he felt he had enough, he contacted his attorneys and told them his plan.

They told him he was crazy. He said that might well be, but there was nothing unethical about what he was asking, and if they couldn't cooperate, he'd simply find attorneys who would. Eventually they acquiesced, setting up the meeting he requested with Westland Cryonics' chief of operations, John Cumberlin, a dour administrator in his sixties, and Westland's legal counsel, an energetic young man named Haas.

Ray sat quietly as his lead attorney, David Chang, went over Ray's story once again; when he was finished, Cumberlin sighed indulgently and assured him that a full systems check had been run upon Mr. Bava's complaint, and everything was functioning flawlessly.

"That may well be," Chang said. "But this technology is still very new. There's still so much we don't know about the workings of the human mind — can you discount the possibility the technology is affecting the sleepers in ways science hasn't anticipated?"

"That's errant speculation, counselor," Cumberlin said with a trace of irritation.

"Well then how do *you* explain my client's experience?"

"Mr. Bava has obviously had a dream. A very vivid, very disturbing dream."

"Yes," Chang said carefully, "I believe you told him there was reason to believe cold sleepers dream more vividly than normal..."

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"Exactly," Cumberlin said. "Mr. Bava is suffering from a cryonically induced delusion, of sorts — nothing more."

Haas's antennae went up, but it was too late; Ray's attorney pounced:

"So you're admitting," he said, "that this 'cryonically induced delusion' is a result of your negligence?"

"He didn't say that," Haas said quickly.

Ray smiled.

Chang went on, "You knew sleepers were prone to these kind of nightmares, yet you took no steps to guard against them. Sounds like negligence to me."

"You have no case, Mr. Chang."

"Whether we do or not," Chang said, "I hope you have your spin doctors ready to handle the public fallout when this hits the media. A lot of people out there still don't quite trust the whole concept of cold sleep..."

Haas and Cumberlin exchanged frustrated looks. Finally, Cumberlin made an almost imperceptible nod to Haas, and the attorney turned back to Chang. He sighed. "And what exactly would it take, counselor, to make your client...'whole'?"

Ray smiled again. He spoke for the first time.

"Not much, really," he said calmly. "I just want to be put back into cold sleep."

It was not, by a long shot, the answer they had expected.

IT TOOK LESS THAN A WEEK for a new living trust to be drawn up, with some very specific and (to everyone but Ray) baffling instructions, but soon Ray found himself once again lying naked on a gurney as electrodes were pasted onto his body — and, shortly after that, climbing into the same sleep chamber from which he had only just been released. He watched as the glass lid swung shut; listened to the hiss of anesthesia and liquid nitrogen being pumped in. Shivering once at the cold, he closed his eyes; the light behind his shut eyelids turned from red to white.

For a long time, it seemed, he was conscious of nothing but whiteness, oblivion, a sense of floating free without direction. He panicked a little: Would this work again? What if it didn't, what if he couldn't find her again? What —

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He heard the rising howl of the wind in the distance.

Felt the bitter cold of the storm.

He opened his eyes.

He was standing outside the Refuge — the inverted "snow globe," as Thomas described it — the storm raging around him, the cold as bitter and palpable as ever. But now he was no longer frightened of it. The airlock stood a few yards away, the particle field neutralized; calmly Ray entered it, the field activating behind him, the access door opening in front of him.

The door to the hydroponics lab was open; Ray crossed the grounds of the estate, entered, and cut through the lab into the main corridor. The hallway was empty, and, except for the distant moan of the wind, silent. Valle and his damned sense of theatrics. He entered the dining hall; it, too, was empty. He was about to ascend the staircase and head for the conservatory when he heard the familiar silken/steel voice behind him:

"Mr. Bava. Welcome back."

Valle stood in the doorway, holding a wine glass; he raised it in a mock-toast. "Dom Perignon, 2018. Join me?"

Ray shook his head. "Why bother? None of this is real."

"Oh, it's real enough to suit my taste." Valle smiled, taking a sip of the champagne.

Unafraid, Ray took a step forward. "I looked you up, Valle: Fortune 500 company, billions in assets...doesn't this all seem kind of low-rent, in comparison?"

Valle shrugged. "I didn't come here by choice, Mr. Bava, any more than you did. But it has its compensations. True, in the real world the pleasures of exercising power come from overcoming resistance. But it's also true that you often exert that power indirectly, at best; it filters through so many levels, so many people. Here, I exert power *directly*. No variables; no intermediaries. The application of pure, brute force — total and absolute control over another human being. It's not without its intoxications."

"Recreational therapy for sociopaths," Ray said acidly.

Valle sighed. "At first, you know, I found you stimulating; a rogue element in a game I controlled a little too completely. That's why I usually allow one player to retain some sense of morality — where's the sport in it otherwise?"

He finished his champagne, then tossed the glass aside; it shattered against the wall.

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"But frankly, Mr. Bava, you're beginning to bore the hell out of me." At the word "hell" — as though to demonstrate Valle's utter mastery of this world — Ray suddenly found himself on a parched desert landscape, nothing but heaped rock formations for as far as he could see, a huge swollen sun filling a burnt orange sky. A blisteringly hot wind assaulted him, nearly knocking the breath from him until he reminded himself that it was no more real than the cold of the storm had been.

He heard a sound behind him. He turned to find the other "guests" — all six of them — standing several feet away, their expressions curiously blank, eyes glassy as mirrors.

"If someone dies in a dream," Valle mused, "do they die in reality? What do *you* think, Ray?"

He glanced over at his guests.

As one, they began to change.

A more profound change, however, than Ray had ever witnessed: their bodies rippled and expanded, muscles gaining so much mass that their clothes burst to shreds. Their skin turned scarlet and leathery; their hands lengthened into claws; they sprouted enormous, lizard-like tails. Their faces, still half-human, were recognizable despite their red, slitted eyes, the crooked horns bulging from their foreheads, and the satanic smiles creeping across their faces...

Valle turned to the demon who used to be Thomas and said, flatly, "Kill him."

Thomas grinned demonically and eagerly sought to comply. With a fevered hiss and impossible swiftness, he lunged at Ray. Ray narrowly managed to dodge him by jumping up onto a low outcropping of rock, briefly gaining some high ground.

Thomas swiped at him with his claw, grazing him, drawing blood. The others — Justine, Franklin, Debi, Angelique, even Gina — hissed and spat their approval.

Ray kicked Thomas in his huge chest, doing little more than irritate him: he roared his displeasure and took another swipe at Ray, who escaped it only by jumping off the rocks.

The desert sand seemed suddenly hotter; he could feel blisters forming on his feet, even with his shoes on.

"Thomas, you were right: there *is* more to you than this," Ray said. "This is all a dream, *his* dream — you understand?"

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Thomas snarled and lunged at him again; Ray, knowing he could never compete with his demonic strength, backed away...

"You're not a demon! You're not *his* son! Your name is Thomas Lindley — you're a teacher — "

"He's lying!" Valle called out. "You are Moloch, abomination of the Ammonites! *Kill* him!"

Thomas smacked Ray across the face with his claw, sending him sprawling to the desert floor. The sand seared his skin and his cheek split open like a bruised peach; his ankle twisted as he went down.

Thomas/Moloch advanced on him.

Ray scrambled to his feet, but the pain in his ankle shot like lightning up his leg. "You have a wife, and three children!" Ray shouted, despite the pain. "Your wife's name is Anne, your children are Dennis, Kimberly, Michelle — "

Thomas slowed; some faint memory stirring in his fogged mind. Ray kept up the volley of words: "You *are* more than hunger, and anger, and envy. You're a *good man*, Thomas. Try to remember!"

Valle, growing alarmed now, cried out: "You are *Moloch!* Bringer of plagues, slaughterer of men — "

"Anne," Ray countered, *"Dennis. Kimberly. Michelle — "*

Thomas stopped. Recognition glimmering in his blood-red eyes...

Shaken, Valle glanced at the others. "Get him! *Get* him!"

The others converged on Ray. Justine hissed and made a rush for him, which Ray barely avoided; Franklin snapped up a heavy boulder and hurled it at him with a roar. Ray fell to the ground, rolled out of the way, scrambled to his feet—

Gina was suddenly in front of him, a demonic smile on her once-sweet face. She flexed her reptilian tail and sent it smashing into him, snarling with glee as Ray fell backwards onto the sand again.

The demons began to advance on him, *en masse.*

Ray gathered his breath as best he could and shouted, "Justine! You're — you're the eldest of three children — your brother's name is Howard, your sister died when she was five — killed by a drunk driver! Her name — her name was — "

Justine stopped in her tracks.

Her voice was distorted but soft as she said, *"Marie..."*

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There was a tear in one of her slitted eyes.

Ray got to his feet. "Franklin! Your wife is Emma, she visits you in the sleep chambers every week. Angelique — you really were an author, you gave hope and inspiration to people, you're not a murderer! Gina — "

He forced himself to look into her transformed face. "You tried to save thousands...from the Osaka virus..."

All of them were stopped dead now, the veils of memory starting to lift, the realization that this was just a dream beginning to sink in. "All of you, you have minds and souls of your own! Try to remember. Remember the people you loved — " He glanced at Gina and his voice caught: "The people who love *you*... "

Valle must have been furiously attempting to consolidate his control, because the hellish desert landscape abruptly vanished, and Ray and the others were suddenly back in the Refuge.

"*No!*" Valle shouted. "You are Belial, Lilith, Astaroth, Ishtar!"

But apparently his guests no longer believed that, as one by one they began reverting to their human forms: leathery skin softening to normal flesh, slitted eyes expanding, lizard-like tails vanishing. In moments, they were human again, not demons — but neither were they the same people Ray had known. Freed from Valle's influence, their true personalities had reasserted themselves, in their faces and in the clothing they envisioned themselves wearing.

Thomas was recognizably the same, still young and handsome — but the unpleasant curl to his lips, the narrowness to his eyes, had vanished. He actually had a warm, open face — and his smile had neither derision nor bitterness in it.

Justine's face, too, had lost its hard edges; there were faint laugh-lines around her mouth and eyes. Angelique, no longer the haggard paranoiac, was closer to the woman Ray had seen in the tape — she held herself with confidence, assurance. Debi, far from the bimbo Valle had desired, was a sedate-looking businesswoman in a tailored suit-dress. Franklin looked a bit sour and curmudgeonly, maybe not someone Ray would ever want to know, but certainly not the spineless craven of Valle's fashioning. And Gina...

Ray was almost afraid to look. But, thank God, she was still the same woman he had fallen in love with — her hair shorter, her clothing more stylish, but recognizably the same woman.

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Ray turned to Valle, to see his reaction — but Valle was gone.

Moments later, the dining room, the house, the Refuge was also gone.

For a moment they were all standing in the midst of the freezing storm — and then the *storm* was gone, as well.

The dead trees flickered and faded, replaced with the bright white limbo Ray knew all too well.

Angelique smiled her silent gratitude at Ray, then she, too, faded like a snow sculpture left in the thawing sun.

Franklin followed. Then Debi, and Justine.

Ray could guess what was happening: now that the individual sleepers were aware that they were, in fact, asleep, they were returning to their own dreams — and the common dreamscape they had shared was starting to break up.

Ray took Gina's hand. "Don't let go. We can still be together." But already he could see light through the pale oval of Gina's face, and he knew she was slipping away.

"Ray...when you left...was it because they found a cure?" Her voice sounded faint, though she was right in front of him.

"Yes, but I'm not going anywhere. I made the arrangements before I came back: they'll thaw me out when they thaw you out — when they find a cure for the Osaka virus."

The light was shining through her eyes now.

"I can't let you do that," she said, dismayed. "Sleep away the years — maybe decades—?"

Her voice was growing fainter still, like a train whistle dopplering into the distance.

She put a hand, translucent as milk glass, to his cheek. "I...I love you, Ray, but...if you really love *me*...please. Go back to your life."

Ray took her hand — still warm, despite what was happening — and cupped it with both of his. "You don't understand," he said softly. "Life out there — without you — that's the dream. *This* is real."

She was staring at him with awe and wonder. "Ray...I...I can see light...shining through your eyes."

Tears welled up in her own eyes, and the light behind them made them sparkle like diamonds.

"Dream of me," he told her. "Dream me back to your side, as I'll dream of you. We can do it."

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She kissed him — lightly; tenderly — on the lips. "And if we can't?" she said. Her voice was a million miles away.

He smiled. "Together or not...I'll never leave you."

And then the light burst through the delicate outline of her face, and she was gone.

At night, when the noise and bustle from the research section directly above is stilled, and the only sounds on Cryonics Level Seven are the soft trill of the cardiac monitors and the low sigh of the respiratory supports, the med-techs who work the graveyard shift gather for coffee and conversation, wondering sometimes at what thoughts, if any, pass through the minds of their sleeping charges. Can they hear sounds? Do they feel the cold? How long does it take for a nerve impulse to cross a synapse? To travel from one hemisphere of the brain to the other? If they think, do images and ideas move like glaciers across the landscape of their minds — does it take days, months, years to complete a single thought? Do they dream?

Many years ago — long before anyone here today was working at the center — a man, released from suspension, told not only of dreaming in cold sleep, but sharing that dream with others. His story would have long since passed into the realm of urban legend, of cryonics mythology, but for one thing: he was still here. Sometimes, in the black hours of morning, the med-techs speculate about what could possibly have motivated a young, healthy man to return to cold sleep. Sometimes — though this is against all the regulations — one or two of them go down to section five, corridor J, and look at him, trying to figure it out. Next to the man is a woman who's been in suspension as long as he has, and the techs gaze at them as Egyptologists study the remains of pharaohs, with awe and a certain reverence. Most of them go away frustrated. Some of them claim to see something. Some insist that they can make out, on the faces of both the man and the woman, the trace of a smile. And they wonder if they shall live long enough, any of them, to find out for sure.

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F&SF COMPETITION

REPORT ON COMPETITION 65

For Competition 65, we asked you to write a short blurb of no more than one hundred words. You were to put yourself in the position of praising a friend's book even though you loathed it. We asked that you write the blurb in such a way as to sound as if you were praising the book when you actually hated it.

A number of you rose to this interesting challenge (which, unfortunately, professional writers must rise to all the time) with the well done blurbs below. A handful of you complained about the word "blurb." Yes, my friends, ugly as it is, "blurb" is a publishing term — and these days it is both a noun and a verb.

Here are the winners.

FIRST PLACE goes to **Lars Klores** of Washington, D.C. for these understated entries:

Battlefield Earth by L. Ron Hubbard;

— "Hubbard's greatest achievement since the founding of Scientology."

Tekwar by William Shatner;

— "Shatner writes as well as he acts."

Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury;

—"Book-burning has never been so compelling."

SECOND PLACE goes to **Adrian Marlowe** of Tampa, FL, who wrote blurbs for one book — *Dhalgren* by Samuel R. Delany:

—"If you liked *Finnegan's Wake*, you'll love this book."

— "Delany makes Heidegger look like Hemingway!"

— "Through an act of outrageous cunning, the author manages to make any reader feel like an alien while staring at the sentences!"

RUNNERS UP

"The Whimper of Whipped Dogs" by Harlan Ellison:

—"So relentlessly painful...I was hard-pressed to finish it...a searing critique of our society..."

—Elicia Squid Cardenas,
Brighton, MA

It by Stephen King:

— "Contains the optimism of Orwell's *1984*, the wit and levity of Lovecraft's *Call of Cthulu*, and the rich character development of

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Krantz's *I'll Take Manhattan.*"

—**Scott Morgan,** Broomall, PA

A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy by Douglas Adams:

—"Douglas Adams' authorship literally deserves the 'all-thumbs' up!"

—**Jeannette Funcke,** South San Francisco, CA

COMPETITION 66 (Suggested by Stephen Mendenhall):

Write a brief anecdote (of 100 words or less) which takes place immediately after the end of any fantasy or SF work.

For example: in the anthology *Galaxy*, there's a story by Allan Danzig, called "The Great Nebraska Sea." The entire midwestern U.S. is inundated by geological cataclysms, and many states now consist of only a few isolated islands.

Anecdote: The governor of Kansas goes on statewide TV and tells people, "I don't think we're *in toto* anymore, Kansas."

One other note: Please send us new competition suggestions. If we use yours, we'll give you a year's subscription to the magazine.

RULES: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, 143 Cream Hill Road, W. Cornwall, CT 06796. Entries must be received by April 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

PRIZES: First prize, eight different hardcover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different SF paperbacks. Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 66 will appear in the August issue.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

STORMS ON THE WEST COAST, storms in the East. As we write this, half the country is buried in snow, while the other half is recovering from one of the worst wind storms in thirty years. The winter of 1995 is (was) a harsh one.

Harsh winters always make spring doubly beautiful. And even though we write this in the winter, it will appear in the spring — a sort of low-tech time travel. Since we anticipate a beautiful spring, we thought we'd have a beautiful issue to help celebrate.

Which meant, of course, that we needed a beautiful cover. Hugo winner **Bob Eggleton** came through with his cover for **Nina Kiriki Hoffman's** "Airborn." "Airborn" is a magical story about twins, Terry and Tasha, who just happen to be witches. Tasha returns to Atwell, her home town, to learn more about her craft, only to discover that her twin, Terry, has moved to the darker, dangerous aspects of witchcraft. Her parents' happy marriage is on the verge of destruction, and to make matters worse, Tasha's own powers seem out of control. "Airborn" is a spring story that shows Hoffman at her best.

Also in May, **Laurel Winter** returns with an alternate world fantasy story about music and dedication. "The Blood Harp" is the story of Kemmelin who spends her days cleaning the harpist's halls, and dreaming of playing. The blood harp is an insidious instrument. A harpist who plays it well slits her fingers on the strings, and the blood feeds the instrument, making the most beautiful music in the world. But the harpist must be willing to give all for her art. Kemmelin believes she can do that, but she doesn't realize that the harpist's hall harbors deeper, darker secrets beneath its blood-coated stage.

Robert Onopa provides May's science fiction story. In keeping with our spring theme, Robert's story focuses on camping. Not just any kind of camping, but "Camping in the Biosphere."

Future issues bring more experiments. This summer we will have an all-new-writer issue, which will bring you the talents of the field's rising stars. We also have a marvelous fantasy/horror story written by Czech writer **Vilma Kadleckova** and translated by her husband and **Bruce Sterling**. **Ian MacLeod**, **Linda Nagata** and **Lewis Shiner** will provide excellent science fiction, while **Marc Laidlaw, Richard Bowes**, and **Rick Wilber** will give us strong fantasy stories. Add our monthly columns and our stunning cover art, and you have a dozen reasons to keep your subscription current.

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